

## **Vietnamese teachers' self-efficacy in teaching English as a Foreign Language: Does culture matter?**

**ABSTRACT:** The paper explores the influence of culture on the sense of self-efficacy in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) of a group of university teachers in Vietnam. Research exploring the relationship between culture and self-efficacy is extremely rare despite the acknowledged importance of culture in the formation of self-efficacy beliefs. This study took the form of qualitative research with diverse, data collection instruments: individual interviews, focus group discussions, observations and journaling. Findings indicate that certain features of the Vietnamese cultural context impacted on the way the study teachers constructed their sense of self-efficacy. Specifically, under the influence of a Vietnamese sense of belonging, the study teachers tended to rely more on efficacy-building information from other people rather than from themselves. The perception of inequality in power may have heightened negative emotional arousal, thus contributing to a negative sense of self-efficacy among the teachers. The Vietnamese concept of face and the high status of teachers in the social hierarchy in part mediated teachers' sense of self-efficacy. The perceived burden of performing both parenting and teaching roles and responsibilities may have diminished the self-efficacy in teaching of female teachers. Finally, the contribution and implications of the study are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Teacher self-efficacy, culture, EFL teaching.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the Vietnamese context, research has indicated that the language ability of Vietnamese learners is limited despite many years of learning the language (Dang, 2006; Nguyen & Vo, 2004). Reasons for learners' low levels of English competence, such as teachers' "old-fashioned" teaching methods or learners' inappropriate learning strategies are widely acknowledged (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013; Duong, 2012; Khoi & Iwashita, 2012). A few studies have been done to explore factors contributing to teachers' adherence to traditional teaching approaches (Le & Barnard, 2009; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) or to suggest how to help Vietnamese students learn the English language better (Phan, 2011; Tran, 2007). However, few studies have investigated the factors influencing teachers' self-beliefs around their competence to teach English and what should be done to help them to be more self-

efficacious, despite the acknowledged relationship between teacher confidence in teaching and student learning (Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011).

Teachers' sense of self-efficacy can be defined as "teachers' beliefs in their capabilities of supporting learning in various task and context-specific cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social ways" (Wyatt, 2010, p. 603). Research has indicated that teacher self-efficacy is affected by a number of factors, e.g. cultural and contextual factors, teachers' knowledge and teachers' cognitive processing of efficacy-relevant information (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Wyatt, 2012). Few studies have been done on the relationship between teachers' knowledge and their sense of self-efficacy (Wyatt, 2010, 2013). Much research has investigated the role of context in influencing teacher self-efficacy (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008; Mahajna, 2014; Palmer, 2011; Petersen & Treagust, 2014). What has not been established in any degree, however, is how culture as a major contextual factor affects teacher self-efficacy. Therefore, the focus of the study reported here was to explore the effect of Vietnamese culture on the self-efficacy in teaching EFL of a group of university teachers. It was hoped that the findings would be indicative of ways of strengthening the sense of self-efficacy beliefs among such teachers. The study addressed the following questions:

1. Does Vietnamese culture have any influence on EFL teachers' sense of self-efficacy in teaching the English language?
2. If so, in what ways do cultural factors affect teacher self-efficacy?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Teacher self-efficacy**

As noted by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), self-efficacy is a facet of Social Cognitive Theory which rests on the idea that environmental factors, personal factors and behaviors are constantly influencing one another (Bandura, 1997, p. 6). Teacher self-efficacy is a type of perceived self-efficacy, "a judgment of capability" (Bandura, 1997, p. 43), a "forward-looking capability" (Klassen et al., 2011, p. 26); it is one's self-perception of competence, not one's actual level of competence (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 211). Schunk, Pintrich,

and Meece (2008) note that under the influence of personal and environmental differences, an individual can judge his/her self-efficacy to perform similar tasks differently.

The conceptualisation of teacher self-efficacy has undergone steady development, although teacher self-efficacy has been the subject of research for years. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as “[belief] in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). He argued that self-efficacy beliefs, an individual judgment of capability, influence outcome expectations of behaviour, i.e. the judgment of likely consequence of a specific action, but not vice versa. Put differently, outcome expectancies are a weak predictor of the accomplishment of a specific task compared to perceived self-efficacy. However, outcome expectancies and self-efficacy beliefs are not always independent of each other and expected outcomes do play an important role in predicting teachers’ teaching behavior. Firstly, it can be difficult to separate expected outcomes and self-efficacy beliefs. It is human nature to be concerned about both the outcome of behavior as well as the competency to perform a related task (Eastman & Marzillier, 1984). Secondly, self-efficacy beliefs influence expected outcomes (Bandura, 1997) but self-efficacy beliefs can, in turn, be influenced by outcome expectancies because different expected outcomes in various contexts might lead to changes in self-efficacy beliefs (Williams, 2010). Thirdly, teachers might act on their outcome beliefs and in many cases outcome expectancies might be the main predictor of teachers’ behaviors, not their self-efficacy beliefs.

Tschannen-Moran and colleagues (1998) suggested that Bandura (1997) omitted emphasising outcome expectancy because he considered that it was a weak predictor of motivation. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), however, argued that because teacher self-efficacy is context-specific, a context-related factor related to the requirements of the teaching task was an important factor in addition to personal efficacy (p. 210). The researchers expanded Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy conceptualization by adding teaching context as a component of teacher self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and her colleagues consequently defined teacher self-efficacy as “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 233). Wyatt (2015, p. 4) points out that Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) intended but failed to combine two dimensions of teacher self-efficacy, i.e. teachers’ beliefs about their capability and perceptions of outcomes since “there is no

reference to outcomes, to the learning that might result from the accomplishment of the task” in their definition.

In his recent review of the literature on teacher self-efficacy, Wyatt (2012) argues that definitions of teacher self-efficacy should reflect the fact that teaching is complex, i.e. teachers are assumed to support learners cognitively, metacognitively, affectively and socially (p. 171). Wyatt (2012) agrees with Takahashi (2011) that a contemporary concept of teacher self-efficacy should focus on both teachers’ beliefs about their ability to take actions and teachers’ perceptions of outcomes. Both scholars explain that teachers’ concerns for the influence of their teaching behavior are related to teachers’ responsibility for student learning, which can affect their beliefs in their abilities to teach students. In addition, retaining task-specificity is important in defining teacher self-efficacy (Wyatt, 2012, p. 172). Recently, Wyatt (2012) has proposed a definition of teacher self-efficacy that, as he argues, satisfies these criteria. We adopt this definition of teacher self-efficacy in this study (see above).

Individuals construct their self-efficacy beliefs by processing information derived from the following four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). *Mastery experiences* are the authentic performances, the perceptions of past experiences of a teacher, both successful and unsuccessful. *Vicarious experiences* refer to information gained from observing other teachers, which can enhance or weaken the development of the personal efficacy beliefs of the teacher who is the observer. *Verbal persuasion* refers to the negative or positive verbal judgments of other people about a teacher’s capability to carry out a particular task. *Affective states* such as anxiety and the mood of the teacher in performing a particular task may affect his/her feeling of competence or incompetence (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1997) highlighted the role of cognitive processing in activating four sources of self-efficacy information (p. 81). In order to assess their personal efficacy, people first select the pieces of information they need to attend to, then weigh and integrate these selected types of information to construct their self-efficacy (p. 79). Bandura (1997) pointed out that people’s rules of weighting and interpreting efficacy information appear to influence this cognitive processing. These rules vary among individuals and largely depend on contextual factors. Recently, drawing on Fives and Alexander (2004, as cited in Wyatt, 2012, p. 173), Wyatt (2012, 2015) adds that the cognitive processing of efficacy-building information is in part influenced by teachers’ constructions of knowledge and belief systems. The importance of

context on cognitive processing and the impact of teachers' skills and knowledge on cognitive processing have been targeted in several studies, e.g. Petersen & Treagust (2014) and Wyatt (2010; 2012; 2015). The potential role of culture in influencing the formation of efficacy beliefs is, however, largely ignored in the teacher self-efficacy literature, although the importance of "the cultural meaning of efficacy in terms of the roles, expectations, and social relations" in teachers' constructions of efficacy beliefs is acknowledged by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998, p. 203). Comparing the self-efficacy beliefs of Asian and American adolescents, Oettingen and Zosuls (2006) hypothesise that cultural values and practices may determine the availability of sources of efficacy information and the psychological processes of efficacy appraisal. Researchers such as Pajares (2007) and Klassen (2004b) have more recently called for research which would potentially enhance an understanding of how efficacy beliefs operate as a function of culture.

### **Studies on the relationship between culture and self-efficacy**

As a concept, *culture* is elusive, contested and enduring. Some have attempted to define it as a product – as observance, custom, habit, taste and artifact – as Eliot (1948) did in his classic *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*:

It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. (p. 31)

Others have viewed it in more dynamic terms as a process – a situated encounter with an environment – what Williams described as the "*act* of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole" (1954, p. 157).

In the 1990s, the widely referenced work of Hofstede (e.g. 1991), identified four (later extended to five) dimensions of culture on the basis of a factor analysis of questionnaires completed by IBM employees in a range of national settings, including *power distance* (egalitarian versus hierarchical), *individualist-collectivist*, *masculinity-femininity* (for example, competition versus nurture) and *uncertainty avoidance* (relative comfort with uncertain versus an urge for order/structure/routine). Such work provided the temptation to stereotype Asian cultures as collectivist and Western cultures as individualist. In other words, the work tended to encourage essentialist ways of thinking about, say, Vietnamese culture.

We share the concerns of critics such as McSweeney (2002) and Signorini, Wiesemes and Murphy (2009), who have critiqued Hofstede for his logic, his methodology, his inclination to essentialize culture and to treat it deterministically, to view it as static, and to oversimplify cultural differences. Indeed, we share McSweeney's view that "such is the elusiveness of the concept of culture that there is no consensus about which 'units' or 'dimensions' should be used for describing culture: essentially cultures are still 'grasped'" (2002, p. 106). Likewise, we share Hall's view of culture as "dynamic, comprising recurring constellations of dispositions and expectations that are continually recreated in the myriad intellectual and practical communicative activities constituting our daily lives" (2008, p. 50). In doing say, we are not dispensing with the concept. Rather we are sympathetic with attempts to define culture as provisional yet systematic determinations of group-based tendencies on the basis of a range of evidence. This is not essentialism, but rather an acknowledgement of the "recurring constellations of dispositions" that Hall (2008) refers to. (An example of this is Locke & Daly, 2007, which compared the politeness practices of Chinese and New Zealand students as evidenced in their participation in asynchronous online discussion.) For this reason, while terms such as *collectivist* and *individualist* are mentioned below, they should be read as characterising tendencies associated with a cultural group. A Vietnamese person may exhibit individualistic behaviour and still be Vietnamese.

In a recent review, Klassen et al. (2011) state that studies exploring the impact of culture on self-efficacy beliefs are extremely rare. According to Klassen (2004b), most of the research on the potential role of cultural factors on self-efficacy takes a cross-cultural perspective. Findings of these studies indicate that a tendency towards collectivism appears to encourage participants from non-Western cultures (e.g. China) to rate their self-efficacy lower than those who are not from these cultures (e.g. the US). For example, Mau (2000) found a difference in the career decision-making self-efficacy of Taiwanese and American students. The Taiwanese students scored significantly lower on decision-making self-efficacy measures than did their American friends. The finding that participants from so-called collectivistic cultures display lower self-efficacy beliefs than their counterparts from non-Western cultures was also noted in the studies of Eaton and Dembo (1997), Lam, Chen, and Schaubroeck (2002), Leung (2001), Salili, Chiu, and Lai (2001), Ho and Hau (2004), and Schaubroeck, Lam, and Xie (2000). Researchers agree that cultural backgrounds possibly account for the difference. A collective orientation valuing group effort rather than individual abilities possibly led Taiwanese to rate their self-efficacy low (Mau, 2000). An emphasis on humility and academic

achievement perhaps resulted in the lower self-efficacy but higher performance of non-Western cultural groups such as Canadian Chinese or Asian Americans compared to groups with an individualistic orientation (Eaton & Dembo, 1997; Salili et al., 2001). A tendency towards modesty in groups with a collectivistic disposition, together with pressure to assume responsibility and to perform, were reflected in the lower efficacy of Chinese teachers (Ho & Hau, 2004). Mau (2000) concluded that unlike an individual disposition, a collective disposition seemed not to encourage the development of self-efficacy.

However, some research indicates that groups with a collectivist orientation engender self-efficacy in different ways and with different premises. Earley (1993; 1994) and Earley, Gibson and Chen (1999) conducted a number of studies investigating the effects of individual-based feedback/training or group-based feedback/training on self-efficacy beliefs and performance, which are related to cultural dispositions of individualism and collectivism mentioned above. They found that a focus on individual gain and rewards did not result in high levels of efficacy for managers coming from China and Israel but enhanced the self-efficacy beliefs of those from the US. Incentive schemes emphasising individual performance did not increase the self-efficacy of subjects with a collectivist disposition, possibly because they “downplay[ed] the social ties that bind workers to their ingroups” (Earley, 1993, p. 343). Individual-focused training contributed to high self-efficacy beliefs of managers from the United States. These managers did not display any changes in self-efficacy beliefs when receiving group-focused training. Managers from China, on the other hand, obtained high levels of self-efficacy beliefs with group-focused training (Earley, 1994). Both personal and group-based feedback indicating success strongly increased the self-efficacy beliefs of workers with a Chinese cultural background. For workers from the US, personal-based feedback most strongly enhanced their self-efficacy judgments (Earley, Gibson, & Chen, 1999). The researchers suggested that “a collectivist’s sense of self is based on both personal and group-based information” (Earley et al., 1999, p. 614) and that self-efficacy beliefs change in accordance to cultural orientation, the nature of training, feedback and incentive schemes (Earley, 1993, 1994). This latter point is important, because it draws attention to the fact that in any context, there are factors at work impacting on self-efficacy in addition to the cultural, what McSweeney (in critiquing Hofstede) calls the “non-cultural” (2002, p. 109), such as class sizes, managerial governance structures and salary regimes.

Examining factors that explain the higher academic achievement of Korean students compared to their Western counterparts, Kim and Park (2006) found a relationship between certain aspects of Korean culture, students' self-efficacy and learning motivation, and academic achievement. They viewed an emphasis on academic achievement as important in Korean culture. Parents' high expectations of children's learning, children's feelings of indebtedness towards parents, and respect toward teachers partly encouraged students to learn, and strengthened their self-efficacy beliefs and learning motivation. The self-efficacy beliefs and motivation in turn fostered their academic achievement.

The research discussed above sheds light on how certain ascribed aspects of culture, e.g. collectivist and individualist tendencies, and how power tends to operate, affect psychological processes. Collectively oriented people tend to rate their efficacy lower than individually oriented ones, but the lower self-efficacy beliefs do not impede their performance. Self-efficacy beliefs are often more other-oriented than self-oriented for people from non-Western cultures. However, most research investigating this issue is based in cross-cultural studies. No self-efficacy studies up to this point have explored in depth how cultural factors can mediate teacher self-efficacy beliefs in an Asian context. In addition, participants in many studies (e.g. Klassen, 2004a; Leung, 2001; Mau, 2000; Salili et al., 2001) are immigrants. It may be pertinent to question whether certain cultural characteristics are retained when people move to new settings. As indicated above, among non-Western cultures, tendencies defined in terms of an individualist/collectivist distinction and the operation of power and status, vary significantly (Klassen, 2004b, p. 227). The limited research that is available draws attention to the need to conduct studies, like the one reported here, that investigate the potential role of culture in influencing how teachers in the Vietnamese context construct their self-efficacy beliefs.

Next, an overview of Vietnamese cultural factors that have the potential to exert influence on Vietnamese teachers' sense of self-efficacy beliefs in general and the participating teachers of this study specifically is presented. In terms of our stance on the concept of culture, this overview must be seen as a *reading* of Vietnamese cultural tendencies and not an essentialising prescription.



## **THE VIETNAMESE CULTURAL CONTEXT**

### **The Vietnamese sense of belonging**

Many researchers (e.g. Do, 2002; Nguyen, 2000; Tran, 2006) agree that Vietnamese place a high value on group interdependence and mutual relationships, originally shaped by a need to form groups of people to fight against foreign enemies and natural disasters and to produce water-based rice crops. Historically, Vietnam has been invaded and ruled by different foreign enemies. Ancient Vietnamese were aware of the need to group together to fight against those enemies and maintain Vietnamese cultural identity. In addition, the sole economic strength was agriculture of a very basic kind, constantly at risk of being destroyed by continual floods and droughts. Harvesting, embanking against floods and watering crops all required considerable manual work. Therefore, ancient Vietnamese learnt that unity among families and clans could help them survive. Many studies of Vietnamese culture have confirmed that living in a community which highlights harmonious interdependence results in Vietnamese people's predisposition to consider the needs of other people before themselves (see Chu, 2002; Le, 2002).

### **The Vietnamese concept of face**

Tran (2006) states that living in a community leads Vietnamese to especially care for what they say and how they behave in order to live up to the community's rules and expectations. Vietnamese are keenly aware of the potential for social judgment of their behaviour. They tend to form attitudes which they believe will help minimise the risk of losing face (Khuc, 2006). Vietnamese are likely to display good qualities and conceal anything which might potentially harm their dignity and attract social criticism. Khuc states that losing face occurs when individuals feel they are not respected in interactions with others in the community in accordance with their socially developed status and reputation. Vu (2002) proposes that the Vietnamese concept of face is based on a combination of interdependent self (public face) and dependent self (private face). Individuals' public face deals with social values, such as age, sex, social status and social achievement, which they would like to have appreciated and supported by others. Private face is a wish to be socially respected for private thinking, independent behaviour, and freedom of choice, action and decision. Researchers (e.g. Pham, 2008; Tran, 2006) agree that in Vietnamese culture, as in other Asian cultures, a concept of

face focuses more on public face than on private face because of an emphasis on interdependence among members of the culture.

### **The position of women**

Historically, women were undervalued in Vietnamese society, especially during the colonial period (Tran, 2006). Vietnamese women were tied to household work and childcare and were forbidden schooling. They were not given equal property rights and personal rights in comparison to men. Men enjoyed authority over family income and decision-making. Since 1946, the Vietnamese government has taken steps to improve the position of women in society (Tran, 2012). One strategy has been to encourage women to participate in social activities and to find employment in factories and offices. In addition, owing to the high cost of living and a growth in the number of educated women, the participation of women in the workplace has increased rapidly. However, this has created more pressure on women. On the one hand, women in Vietnam today are still expected to display the four feminine virtues: *công, dung, ngôn, hạnh* [performing family duties, having good appearance, having proper speech, displaying proper behaviour], especially the first attribute: performing family duties (Ngo, 2004; Vu, 1998). One possible reason is that Vietnamese people identify themselves as members of extended families and prefer to live near relatives or visit family members frequently (Vu, 1998). On the other hand, Vietnamese women are encouraged to function as effective workers as a result of the government's efforts to achieve gender equity and respond to the economic needs of families. Changes in the characteristics of the workforce (e.g., more working mothers) and changes in family structure (e.g., more dual-career families) have taken place without challenging gender-role expectations. Bourke-Martignoni (2001) argues that women in Vietnam tend to carry "a double or triple role" (p. 12). Women work inside and outside the home, and take care of children, and consequently have no or limited time for participating in other activities. .

### **The status of teachers**

Vietnamese teachers, including language teachers, are socially respected and honoured. The tradition of *tôn sư trọng đạo* [respecting teachers, respecting morality] still operates in contemporary Vietnam. In the Vietnamese language, students often address teachers with an honorific term *thưa* which displays a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Teaching is generally regarded as a highly respected profession. Teachers are believed to greatly influence students' development in terms of knowledge and morality (Nguyen, 2012).

At the same time, in order to deserve social respect, teachers are expected to be role models in terms of knowledge, morality and performance. The Vietnamese Education Law requires teachers to continually develop themselves professionally and ethically and to maintain the prestige of the profession. Teachers are generally expected to behave properly, have an appropriate appearance in front of other people, and possess better knowledge than their students (Nguyen, 2012).

## **METHODS**

The study reported on here was conducted by the first author (sometimes termed “the researcher”) and aimed to understand the relationship between the Vietnamese cultural context and the self-efficacy in teaching EFL of a group of university teachers. The participants in this study were eight university teachers, one male and seven females, who teach General English and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) for students who have failed the National Entrance exam for other universities and register to study at Faculty B for one of three specialised training programmes: Business Administration, Information Technology, and Accounting and Auditing. The university where the teachers were working is a technical university in the South of Vietnam. Faculty B was newly-formed and participating teachers moved to it from Faculty F, which had been established when the university was founded.

### **Participants**

As summarised in Table 1:

- The first teacher, also the youngest one, was Thanh<sup>1</sup>. Thanh had taught at Faculty F at the same university since 2005 before moving to Faculty B.
- The second teacher, Anh, had taught at the faculty for over a year. Before that, she had been a part-time English lecturer at several universities. She had tutored secondary students who were about to take university entrance exams, and was a part-time lecturer for some English language centers.
- Before teaching at Faculty B, My had been an employee of Faculty F. My was also a part-time interpreter.

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<sup>1</sup> Names are pseudonyms.

- Nhung had the longest working experience of the eight participants in the study, and has worked at the university from its earliest days. Like other colleagues, she had moved to Faculty B from Faculty F.
- Phuong was Nhung's best friend and colleague. She had taught at a secondary school in a province in Southern Vietnam for about 4 years before moving to Ho Chi Minh City. After teaching for several years at another secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, she moved to Faculty F in 2003 and transferred to Faculty B in 2005.
- Hoa, the second youngest participant in the study, moved to Faculty B from Faculty F. Before that, she had been a teaching assistant at an international secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City.
- Thu was employed to teach EFL at Faculty B in 2005. She had taught students majoring in English at a university in Central Vietnam for 8 years before moving to Faculty B. She was also a part-time teacher at another university.
- Hung was the sole male participant in the study. Before becoming a lecturer at the study university he had taught English for about 8 years at a secondary school. He spent approximately 5 years teaching at Faculty F before moving to Faculty B. He was also a part-time lecturer at another university.

[Table 1 about here]

## **Research instruments**

The study took the form of a qualitative study, premised on the assumption that knowledge is constructed out of ongoing human interactions and is developed within a social context (Stake, 2010). Qualitative research aims to understand human subjective experience – participants' perspectives on their actions and on the contexts surrounding them (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher employed individual interviews, journaling, observation and focus group discussion as research tools in her study exploring the impact of culture on Vietnamese teachers' self-efficacy. The first author was in the field for seven months and data collection lasted six months.

Focus group discussions were used at the beginning and end of the data collection period. This research instrument is generally regarded as facilitating participation and interpersonal communication and to encourage a supportive environment (Thomas, 2008), which aligns broadly with certain Vietnamese cultural values. Because the teachers in the study had never

participated in any research, the stressful feeling probably produced by their first-time participation in research was hopefully lessened by peers' presence (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 149).

Two rounds of individual interviews were an important data-collection instrument for the study. Collecting self-reported interpretations of the participants' experiences was important since it was anticipated that each teacher in the study would have a different way of internalizing efficacy information.

Participants were also invited to keep weekly journal entries over a three-month period. Journaling helped enable the researcher to keep track of and understand each participant's perspective on significant events and experiences in their own words (Hood, 2009). Such data had the potential to help track possible changes in or development of the teachers' perceptions of the impact of various ongoing activities and experiences (Faizah, 2008), although such changes and development might not occur for all participants.

Observations conducted during the data collection period served as a basis for certain interview questions and enabled the researcher to contextualise findings based on interviews and reflective journaling. Non-participant observation was chosen because a complete observer does not interfere with people or activities under observation (Creswell, 2012, p. 214). Twenty observations of teachers' formal and informal meetings were conducted. Each observation session lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Only formal meetings were audio-recorded. Notes were taken during informal observation sessions. Follow-up interviews were also arranged in order to have participants validate the accuracy of the researcher's observations.

In this study, triangulation as a process is viewed as consistent with the perspective of multiple realities in constructionist/constructivist epistemology. This study employed 'within-method' triangulation. It brought together four different types of research instrument: individual interview combined with focus group discussion, journaling and observation. The study was also person and time triangulated. The data collection period was 6 months and the responses from eight participants were gathered at different points in time.

## **Data analysis**

An inductive coding process as suggested by Creswell (2012) was used for analysing data, along with thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Recordings were transcribed immediately following an interview or observation session. The transcripts were sent back to participants to add or modify content. A range of strategies were used to warrant the claim of trustworthiness in the study: participants' checking of transcripts; triangulation of data instruments, thick description of participants' responses, sharing themes with other PhD students, and prolonged engagement in the field (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The rights of participating teachers to privacy and confidentiality were always respected. The teachers chose their own pseudonyms. For ethical reasons, in this study, the usual pseudonyms were not used in instances where teachers made critical comments of management practices.

The collection, analysis and interpretation of data are inevitably influenced by the researcher's experiences as a teacher of English and by her cultural background as a Vietnamese. The information obtained from the teachers, the transcripts and the interpretation of the data are not to be viewed as facsimile representations of the participants' perspectives. The data themselves need to be viewed as versions or accounts of participants' real experiences or perceptions (Rapley, 2001) and the transcripts as an interpretive process which never entirely captures actual communicative events (Jenks, 2011). Having said that, because this article reports on a supervised study, the second author and his co-supervisor need to be viewed as critical friends, who scrutinised the research process at every step.

## **FINDINGS**

### **The salience of other-oriented feedback**

Findings suggest that study teachers relied more on verbal and non-verbal feedback from other people (social persuasion) than from their own reading or interpretation of how they taught (mastery experiences) to form their self-efficacy in teaching. The teachers reported different forms of feedback from students, colleagues and leaders which had the potential to increase or decrease their self-efficacy in teaching EFL.

For example, students' and colleagues' behaviour encouraged teachers to believe that their teaching instruction was effective or teaching activities manageable or not. This led to teachers' positive or negative feelings which, in turn, contributed to their positive or negative assessment of teaching competence. For instance, the first author noted that in Thanh's observed teaching sessions, students appeared to be very inattentive (e.g. checking messages on cell-phones, teasing one another) when she was lecturing. Thanh seemed to be unhappy during the lessons. Students' disengagement was then reflected in Thanh's reflective entries as indicators of her teaching ineffectiveness. Thanh wrote that because her students "looked very tired" or "did something else rather than doing textbook tasks" during her lessons, she thought that they were not motivated to learn and that her EFL instruction was not effective. She mentioned her negative feeling during and after the lessons, which suggested her lack of confidence in her teaching ability.

My, in her reflective entries and in her interviews, also discussed student recognition of her teaching ability which heightened her sense of self-efficacy by recounting a number of stories to the researcher. In one story, some of her students decided not to skip her class despite not feeling well. In another story, her students asked her to be their teacher again in the next semester. My said in one interview:

I felt very happy, very proud of myself. I'm a qualified teacher in my students' eyes. They believe me.

Similarly, Nhung's perception of teaching competence increased owing to colleagues' feedback. She reported her in one interview:

There were two teachers who often asked me for teaching advice. They listened to me attentively. These colleagues' behaviour made me believe that I am respected for what I have, for my teaching results, my teaching ability.

In contrast, feedback from leaders appeared to diminish teachers' constructions of their sense of self-efficacy. All teachers, in their focus group discussions, individual interviews and reflective entries, mentioned a lack of feedback from leaders on their teaching competence. Two teacher participants, in one focus group discussion, used rhetorical questions to describe the lack of recognition or face-value recognition of their teaching ability: "Leaders

compliment us on our teaching ability?”, “Recognition for our teaching ability and effort?” The teachers used a range of negative words and phrases to describe how the leaders rewarded their teaching ability: “no one says anything”, “never hear anything”, “that never happens”, “never”. This state of no or minimal recognition led to a feeling of disappointment that teaching was not valued, or a feeling of confusion and self-doubt about how competent they actually were in teaching EFL. For example, one teacher stated:

I don't experience that [leaders' recognition]. I do not know whether my teaching ability is good enough . . . I have never heard anything from them [leaders].

When reflecting on previous performance (self-oriented feedback), study teachers discussed examples of students' completion (or not) of classroom tasks, students' learning progress or their success in tests (enactive mastery experiences). For example, observation data showed that Anh and Thanh displayed positive feelings when students used certain grammatical structures correctly or were able to answer their questions. In contrast, they appeared to be impatient or unhappy when some students were unsuccessful in mastering a new grammatical structure. Reflecting on one teaching session, Anh wrote that “my hands were tired and eyes were sore because of checking too many grammar mistakes” in students' papers. She concluded that her teaching strategies “seemed to be not effective at all!” Similarly, Nhung, Phuong and Hung, in their focus group discussions, stated that some students in their classrooms were unable to accomplish most learning activities despite the detail of their instructions. The teachers reported feeling “tired” or “disappointed” and answered frankly that they did not like teaching such students. Such negative emotions can be interpreted as reflecting a diminished sense of self-efficacy in teaching.

Findings indicated that in general participating teachers did not consider their own previous performance as the main source of self-efficacy information, because students' learning achievement was the only form of mastery experience that was discussed. Instead, the study teachers reported different forms of verbal and non-verbal feedback from students, colleagues and leaders, which they relied on to construct their sense of self-efficacy. Put differently, other-oriented, not self-oriented evaluation, appeared to be the most salient point of reference for interpreting self-efficacy information for the participating teachers when self-evaluating their teaching ability.



## **The perception of inequality in power**

A key finding of the study was that teachers' perceptions of management practices and/or the exercise of power and authority at the institution seemed to diminish their self-efficacy. Data from formal observation sessions indicated that participating teachers, like other teachers in the Faculty, often kept silent during teacher meetings. All teachers seemed to agree with whatever was delivered to them by leaders, because they did not challenge leaders' prescriptive policies or viewpoints in any meetings I observed. However, in follow-up interviews, most of the study teachers reported feeling "uncomfortable", "unhappy" or "disappointed" during and after these meetings. Reasons for their silence were: "Leaders will not listen to us!", "Everything is already set up, so why discussion!"

Study teachers also reported a lack of opportunities for professional autonomy in their follow-up interviews after teachers' meetings and in journal entries owing to the institution's policies and administrative oversight. They discussed supervisors' intrusions into their instructional time, the institution's new decision to reduce the number of English-learning periods and the institution's promulgation of yearly internal regulations as examples of leaders' disregard of teachers' contributions. Three participants said their lessons were often interrupted by a supervisor's visit to announce the institution's new regulations. One participant used a rhetorical question: "I was instructing my students and all were very attentive. Suddenly, a person stopped all of us to do something very irrelevant. Would you do so?" Another participant also wrote about her unpleasant feeling when a supervisor went straight into her classroom to wake a student up:

I was surprised at first. What's this man doing here? Then I realized that he criticized a student because that student put his head on the table. I got angry but didn't say anything to that supervisor. It was my responsibility and right to let my students do what I thought to be good for them in my classroom. My students have rights in my classroom. They can have a quick rest if they feel they are unable to study.

Regarding the institution's recent decision to reduce the number of English-learning periods without seeking teachers' opinions, one teacher wrote in her journal entry: "That [the institution's new decision] was a top-down decision which really disappointed me." Another participant said that it was "impossible" for teachers at the Faculty to "maintain", let alone to "improve" teaching quality, when they did not have enough time to teach in the classroom.

The study teachers also used a number of negative words and phrases to describe the institution's promulgation of yearly internal regulations: "same as ever", "whether the regulations were sent to the teachers is not important, nothing will be changed", "the regulations are already fixed without our contribution", "we have no voice", "we can't change anything". The disappointment and perceived powerlessness because of a lack of trust contributed to teacher pessimism, which undermined participating teachers' beliefs in their ability to do their job. Teachers in many countries experience inequality in power; however, the impact of power inequality is likely to be stronger for Vietnamese teachers owing to certain cultural beliefs (see below). Findings suggest that teachers' perceptions of inequality in power resulting from current management practices contributed to their diminished sense of self-efficacy.

### **The concern for face loss and public image**

In the study, the concern for face loss and public image appeared to impact on the self-efficacy in teaching EFL of study teachers in at least two ways: encouraging some teachers to discover ways to increase their knowledge, thereby improving teaching practices and their sense of self-efficacy; inducing other teachers to blame factors out of their control for unsuccessful experiences in order to gloss over their lack of teaching knowledge and skills and maintain their respected roles and images, thus suggesting a diminished sense of self-efficacy.

The concern for face loss in part contributed to My's higher sense of self-efficacy in teaching writing. In a focus group discussion conducted at the end of the study, My said that she "had previously avoided to teach writing skills" because she had perceived it as "very challenging" or it "requires the teacher to have in-depth knowledge of English language". However, she felt a need to "wake up" or get out of her "comfort zone" as she said:

I often heard you, Anh, talked about colleagues' writing teaching strategies and your own ways. I also talked to my husband about how to teach writing. I looked at teaching methodology books. . . . I felt that I need to have an understanding of how to teach writing so that if people ask me. . . . I know more about how to teach writing, how to teach grammar. I know more than before. I think maybe I can teach a writing class next semester.

My's self-efficacy in teaching writing skills changed from a low to a high level. One reason for her decision to teach a writing class in the future was that she believed she possessed enough knowledge of teaching writing, which was the result of her determination to enlarge her professional knowledge. Her determination, in turn, was influenced by her concern for face loss. My's care for how other people thought about her teaching practices ("so that if people ask me") probably encouraged her to learn more. In addition, there was the collegial relationship between her and Anh, which might well have involved a need for her to perform as well as the latter.

The concept of face may well have contributed to the negative interpretations of environmental factors for several teachers in the study. For example, at the end of the data collection period, Phuong, Thu, Nhung and Thanh experienced a diminished sense of self-efficacy in using a Communicative Language Teaching-oriented approach in the language classroom. They listed several explanations for their unsuccessful classroom performance, including personal traits and a lack of institutional support regarding professional development opportunities. For example, Phuong, Thu and Thanh, in their focus group discussion and journal entries, mentioned that they thought they were "unable" to change their teaching approach. Thu repeated what she said in her individual interview, that her "inactive temperament" was "not suitable to active tasks". Thanh said that she developed a feeling that teaching writing skills was "too challenging" for her because this was the first year she taught them. Phuong felt her teaching style was "too traditional", "too out-of-date" but "not sure where to start". The four teachers all talked about "a lack of professional development opportunities" at the institution, suggesting both their lack of knowledge and skills to teach competently as well as a desire to participate in such courses. This strategy, that is, blaming things out of their control or other people for a lack of success and teaching expertise, possibly helped these teachers avoid criticism and protect their respected roles and images (i.e. I have the ability to teach. However, the poor performances of my students are either their fault or due to the awful working environment), all of which confirmed their low sense of self-efficacy.

### **The management of dual roles**

Six married female teachers reported in individual interviews and in their journal entries a struggle to be both good parents and effective teachers. It is probable that their perception of

out-of-work roles affected their belief about their ability to fulfil certain task requirements of teaching. For example, My stated that:

I would do much better, my teaching activities would be more flexible and suitable to students if I was not constrained by household chores and if my thoughts were not interrupted by my children. . . . My husband never gives a helping hand in the household chores.

After a teaching week, I feel exhausted. I have to do two duties at the same time. I get into a teaching rut. I am not creative enough in designing teaching activities. . . . I have no time.

She also wrote:

This afternoon, after teaching at the university, I had to pick up my two kids, went to the market and went home to cook dinner. . . . My husband, while I was cooking and looking after the kids, was reading his new book. He told me at dinner time: “This is a very good book, honey!” Two books I bought yesterday afternoon, you know, still in my bag, still in there. I have no time to read them. I feel envious. Vietnamese women are so unfortunate! We have to do all household tasks without husbands’ help!

Similarly, Phuong thought that checking students’ writing work was an important part of her teaching practice. However, according to her, this practice was hindered by household tasks. She explained in one journal entry:

I mark students’ papers while my baby is sleeping or when my husband is not at home. My husband says teaching is at university, not at home and that I should spend more time with my baby. . . . I feel very stressed. I feel my feedback has become less detailed.

Anh revealed in her interview:

In order to do my job-related tasks well, I have to stay up late or wake up early. . . . I review my lesson plans when my kids are already in bed. . . . I don’t go out for a coffee or go shopping at the weekend. I no longer have such hobbies since the day I had children. . . . I always spend time doing lesson plans at the weekend.

Anh was talking about sacrificing her own interests to perform her two roles, which implied that she also experienced a problem with balancing both roles as was the case for other married female teachers.

The male teacher, Hung, and the unmarried female teacher, Thanh, seemed to escape this problem. While Hung emphasised that he was given support by his wife regarding family roles, Thanh's mum helped her with household tasks. Hung said in his interview:

No, no, I don't have any problems with parenting roles or household chores. My wife works at home. We have a small shop. She takes care of our children and our house well. . . . I teach all day. At night, I play with my kids after doing my lesson plans and marking students' papers.

Thanh wrote in a journal entry:

I am the youngest member of my family. I live with my mom. I don't do household tasks. Mom does this. . . . I should enjoy this before getting married.

As such extracts indicated, Hung and Thanh did not encounter difficulties in term of domestic tasks since they relied on other people's help. Overall, these findings confirm that the female participating teachers, like other women in the Vietnamese society, are tied to family roles after getting married.

The extracts mentioned above suggest that although married female participants gave priority to family responsibilities (i.e., completing domestic tasks was at the top of their list), they considered family roles as something of an intrusion on their work obligations, because their teaching roles were also very important to them. It is not surprising that married female teachers in the study developed a sense of injustice on the basis of their greater share of domestic responsibilities in comparison to men. Family roles seemed to decrease the teachers' self-efficacy in teaching since such roles created a range of negative emotions among female teachers who thought that out-of-work roles impaired their job performance.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this study, certain Vietnamese cultural values appeared to influence the formation of teacher self-efficacy beliefs. The findings support Oettingen and Zosul's (2006) hypothesis

that cultural values determine the selecting, weighting and integrating of sources of efficacy appraisal and the forms these sources take.

Vietnamese teachers' constructions of teaching ability were subject to change depending on the verbal and non-verbal feedback they received from students, colleagues and leaders. The teachers appeared to select and give more weight to other-oriented (social persuasion) than self-oriented evaluation (mastery experiences) when judging their teaching ability. Since Vietnamese are educated to love and respect the needs of their in-groups, it is likely that the Vietnamese ethic of harmonious interdependence led to the influential role of feedback coming from other important people. The finding that Vietnamese teachers' self-perceptions of ability were formed by their perceptions of what others told them about their teaching abilities appears to be consistent with the results of other studies (e.g. Earley, 1994; Klassen, 2004a), that members of collective cultures tend to rely more on efficacy-building information from significant others such as family members or members of work-groups rather than from reflecting on one's previous performance.

The vital role of feedback from other people in influencing Vietnamese EFL teachers' self-efficacy points to the potential of improving teachers' sense of self-efficacy by using other-oriented feedback formally and strategically. The possibility of using student feedback on teacher performance in Vietnamese higher education has been confirmed (Nguyen & Mcinnis, 2002). Given teachers' concern for face loss and public image, it is recommended that the purposes of such feedback implementation processes be made clear to teachers. During the first year or first semester of implementation, feedback results should be, perhaps, accessed by teachers only. In the case of peer feedback (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014), confidential discussions occur between individual teachers and observers. In addition, establishing workshops on improving teaching based on the results of performance feedback might be encouraged. Leaders may access evaluation results on condition that a confidential rather than an open approach of reporting is chosen and that the purpose of evaluation is developmental rather than judgmental (Golding & Adam, 2014). Besides, performance feedback should not focus only on weaknesses (Salili, Chiu, & Lai, 2001). Our study also suggests that there should be continuing institutional recognition that includes rewards and incentives to demonstrate to teachers that their participation in evaluation processes and their teaching efforts are valued.

In this study, teachers appeared to often have negative emotions and a low sense of self-efficacy as a result of feelings of powerlessness. They reported feeling disappointed, disregarded and unhappy when their professional autonomy was infringed. Given teachers' concern for face loss and public image in a context where their profession is highly respected, infringing on teacher autonomy is likely to have undermined their professional status, which plausibly prompted these negative emotions. However, teachers appeared not to be willing to challenge leaders' current management practices or points of view. Teachers remained silent during teacher meetings, but subsequently displayed negative emotions. Vietnamese culture values group interdependence and mutual relationships and put little emphasis on individual agency. Obedience and respect for authority are strongly highlighted and people in this culture generally accept social power inequality (Tran, 2006; Luu, 2013). Vietnamese tend to reject open discussions of conflicts, especially in interpersonal communication, when the discussions are believed to disrupt group harmony (Khuc, 2006). On the one hand, being silent may be considered as a conflict-avoiding strategy which is in line with the wish to be associated with other people, to maintain interpersonal harmony and hierarchy, and to maintain group membership. It is likely that these teachers, concerned with face-saving, were hesitant about putting forward their own opinions or refuting an argument in public. On the other hand, it is possible that respect for people in authority may have heightened negative emotional arousal among the teachers in this study (Stewart et al., 2004), since this particular cultural trait appeared to suppress participants' sense of agency.

It appears that prescriptive policies and stringent management practices resulted in teachers' perceptions of powerlessness and contributed to their diminished sense of self-efficacy. In order to engender a healthy sense of self-efficacy among teachers, our study suggests that leaders should move away from the micromanagement of teachers. Encouraging teachers' involvement in relevant decision-making processes is one way of improving teachers' self-efficacy. Leaders should consider working alongside teachers to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of performance indicators and teaching recognition systems. They may also consider establishing a forum where teachers work as collaborators to discuss or share their experience of leading and being led (Bangs & Frost, 2012).

In addition, the study draws attention to the effect of teachers' concern for face loss on their self-efficacy resulting from a perceived lack of knowledge. The concern for face loss seemed to encourage teachers to develop self-protective behaviours to protect their preferred

knowledge model. At certain stages in the study, teachers, in part because of their participation in the research, became aware of their lack of knowledge and skills to teach. While some teachers improved their repertoire of knowledge and felt more self-efficacious as a result, other teachers had a defensive response, i.e. blaming their own problems upon factors that were out of their control. Teachers' consequent behaviours indicated different levels of self-efficacy. This is in line with Bandura's (1997) and other researchers' (e.g. Klassen et al., 2011) contention that teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy will invest considerable effort in finding appropriate teaching materials and activities and feel more self-efficacious as a result, while teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy often avoid challenging tasks and tend to blame unsuccessful teaching experiences on factors out of their control.

The negative effect of teachers' concern for face loss on their self-efficacy suggests the desirability of site-based professional development courses which address EFL teachers' professional needs. Because the university where the teachers were working is a technical university, English language was not considered an important subject and EFL teaching and learning were not given adequate support regarding professional development. Research has suggested the importance of professional learning courses to teacher knowledge and teacher self-efficacy (Locke & Dix, 2011; Locke, Whitehead, & Dix, 2013; Wyatt, 2010). EFL teaching and learning is important to the Vietnamese economy (Do, 2006) and to universities' long-term development (HUI, 2011). Given the negative effect of the concern for face loss on teacher self-efficacy resulting from a perceived lack of knowledge, our study suggests that university leaders should consider setting up professional development courses to enhance staff teaching knowledge and skills, as well as their self-efficacy. Alternatively, universities may want to collaborate among themselves to seek support in relation to EFL teachers' approaches and strategies. Teachers may be able to participate in online and hybrid learning communities (Beach, 2012), making use of opportunities to reflect and cooperate with each other and experts within the usual limitations of time, space and budget.

In this study, the struggle to perform parent and family roles, which springs from the position of women in Vietnamese society and their gender-role expectations, created pressure on married female teachers and contributed to their low sense of self-efficacy. Many women around the globe have to do two roles and many of them manage the associated expectations. However, the expectations appear to be stronger and more formally rooted in Vietnamese



cultural practices than in Western cultural contexts. At the university where the study was conducted, teachers work long hours. They are assigned one or two of three teaching shifts: 6.30 am to 12 pm, 12.30 pm to 5 pm or 5.30 pm to 9 pm. For participating teachers, academic job responsibilities at the institution ranged from teaching, examination supervision, conducting research, lesson planning and marking. Besides, owing to economic burdens, all teachers were involved in part-time job beyond their full-time employment. Although female teachers worked similar hours to male teachers at the university, they, like other working mothers in Vietnam, were expected to be responsible for domestic tasks with little help from their husbands. Thus, it is not surprising that all married female teachers in the study were overloaded.

In a collectivist culture like Vietnam, it appears that women cannot easily free themselves from family responsibilities. The female teachers did not disregard the first of the four traditional attributes – performing family duties. At the same time, they felt they did not function as effective teachers, which meant that they were acting in ways that were counter to a more recent social value – performing well at work. These women believed that they had the ability to teach effectively (a high sense of personal teaching competence); however, the burden of domestic duties diminished their self-efficacy in teaching. The finding that conflicting expectations created pressure on women and restricted their career advancement has been confirmed in studies conducted by Schuler et al. (2006), Nguyen (2008), Lai (2008), and Nguyen (2009). Because more females than males are in teaching positions, the study suggests that leaders should consider developing strategies that decrease female teachers' low sense of self-efficacy resulting from the pressure of performing dual roles. One such strategy, perhaps, is to offer flexible scheduling policies where female teachers can choose working hours or be relieved of night-teaching shifts. The establishment of family-friendly programs (Jamadin, Mohamad, Syarkawi, & Noordin, 2015; O'Brien, Martinez, Ruggs, Rinehart, & Hebl, 2015) at the institution may help female teachers balance work and family demands, and thus have their self-efficacy improved. Leaders may want to encourage all working staff to show support and understanding for those who feel overloaded with their dual obligations (Fiksenbaum, 2014; O'Brien, Martinez, Ruggs, Rinehart, & Hebl, 2015).

The findings of this study were grounded in cultural assumptions without any recourse to measurements of these cultural dimensions. Because there has not been a single empirical examination of the relationship between culture and self-efficacy, more studies on the influence of culture on teacher self-efficacy are needed. As Wyatt (2012) suggests, future

self-efficacy studies should be mixed methods in nature. In addition, the finding that female teachers' self-efficacy was diminished by their perception of role conflicts should be viewed with one limitation in mind. Only one male teacher participated in the present study out of eight participants. Other researchers may want to include more male teachers in order to verify or moderate this finding. Because teacher self-efficacy changes according to context (Bandura, 1997), future longitudinal studies that establish stronger empirical links between cultural values and norms and teacher efficacy formation are much needed.

This study constitutes an original and unique contribution to existing self-efficacy literature by emphasising that teachers' cognitive processes were affected by certain factors in the Vietnamese cultural context. The study therefore can be seen as a small step in response to the lack of studies investigating the impact of culture on teachers' self-efficacy, as previously highlighted by Pajares (2007) and Klassen (2004b).

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