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Training of Trainers for Primary English Teachers in Viet Nam: Stakeholder Evaluation^{*}

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Recently Viet Nam National Foreign Language 2020 Project was launched as a government initiative to improve the foreign language learning and teaching system nationally. One task of the project is to introduce English at grade 3, which requires significant re-training for the country's large number of primary English teachers in both English proficiency and methodology. Training-of-trainers (ToT), a cascade model of trainer training, has therefore been adopted as an option. Drawing from two recent ToT programmes in Viet Nam for primary teachers, the paper discusses the needs of the participants and analyses how the programmes have and have not responded to these needs. Adopting the stakeholder approach in evaluation, the study provides an initial formative evaluation based on insider self-assessment. One of the key findings is that, despite significant efforts, the programmes still need a shaper focus on course design and delivery knowledge and a better connection with participants' target training contexts.

Keywords: training-of-trainers (ToT), primary English teachers, stakeholder evaluation, Viet Nam

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Introduction

In Viet Nam as in many other countries, English is now regarded as the key constituent in economic development and international competitiveness. English has been the dominant foreign language choice at school system preferred by 98 per cent of Vietnamese students (*Vietnamnet*, 2013).

In response to this, Viet Nam National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL2020) was launched during 2010-2011 as an initiative by the government to improve the foreign language learning and teaching system nationally (Government of Viet Nam, Decision 1400/QD-TTg, 2008). One task of the project is to introduce English at grade 3 as a compulsory subject (previously grade 6), which in turn requires significant re-training for the country's primary English teachers. It is estimated that 24,000 primary English teachers will need to be trained or retrained by 2018 (*Vietnamnet*, 2011). A short course hence was developed consisting of two components: English proficiency and Teaching English to Young Learners TEYL. After the course primary English teachers need to pass an English exam and obtain a TEYL certificate.

In order to prepare for the TEYL methodology course, a cascade model of training-of-trainers has been adopted by Viet Nam NFL2020 as an option since 2011. In training-of-trainers (ToT), a small number of participants receive training from key trainers and become qualified trainers themselves (at Tier 1 level), returning to their own contexts to train future primary English teachers (Tier 2). Within Tier 1, two ToT programmes were designed: one programme as a national model and others as regional programmes (Figure 1).

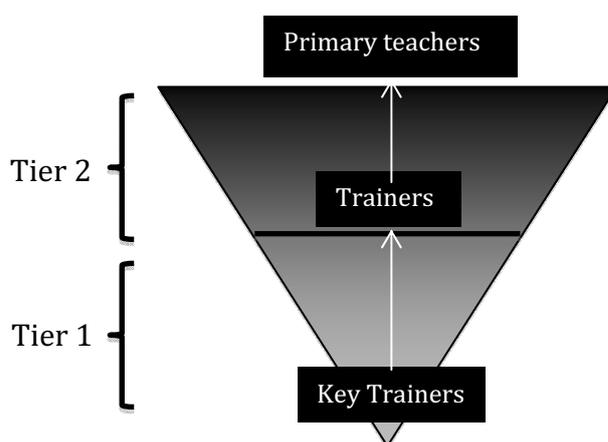


Figure 1. Course structure for primary English teacher training in Viet Nam

The Study

This study looks at two ToT programmes (Tier 1) for primary teacher training (PToT) in Viet Nam: the national model (P1), and one programme developed by a regional university (P2) adopting the structure of P1 with slight adjustments.

After two years of the implementation of primary English teacher re-training, currently Viet Nam NFL2020 is conducting an impact evaluation (Viet Nam Ministry of Education, Decision No.4500/QĐ-BGDĐT, 2013); however the focus is on primary teacher training programs (Tier 2) and not the training-of-trainers (Tier 1). Yet it is necessary to evaluate these PToT programs on their own rights since they can be considered the ‘seed’ for the primary English teacher training programs. In addition, as with most learning and instructional programmes, PToT programs need feedback during the process that will enable the training to undergo regular evaluation and revision (Reinbold, 2013). With these considerations the paper provides a formative evaluation of the two PToT programs in question based on insider self-assessment. The insights the study offers, with the aim of informing course organisers, will be helpful especially

since P2 programs are currently implemented in Viet Nam. The findings will also be useful for other similar contexts undertaking large-scale primary English teacher training.

Methodology

ToT program evaluation has been approached differently in literature. For example, Yolsal et al. (2003) conducted an evaluation on ToT programs for university teachers in medical education in Turkey using questionnaires and discussions for participants during and after the course. The assessment questions were on the contents of the course and the performance of the key trainers. Also relying on questionnaires, Shah, Varia, Rahul and Jain (2012) focused on participant knowledge improvement when they evaluated the ToT framework in a public health program in India. In their research, participants filled pre- and post-test questionnaires and the scores were compared to measure how much knowledge had been obtained. In the field of English language teaching, evaluating a trainer training program in China, Hong (2012) did not rely on participants' feedback but he reflected on the lessons learnt from project implementation: participant selection, budget management, and project sustainability.

Our research contributes to the literature on ToT program evaluation in that it takes into account the views of different parties involved in the educational project while considering both the ideal, theoretical aspect of the project and the actual aspect of implementing it. Adopting a stakeholder approach, the research emphasizes the interplay between different voices. Stakeholder approach acknowledges the power and authority of all stakeholders in the planning and implementation (Kiely, 2012). As such, all stakeholders will be able to take part in the shaping of reality because "the practicalities and possibilities of practice should inform policy development and lead the change process" (Kiely, 2012, p.80). In our study, our particular interests are the evaluative insights of *insider* stakeholders, those who participate in the project

activities in three ways: in planning, implementing, or benefiting (Alderson & Scott 1992, as cited in Kiely 2012, p.81). The insider stakeholder views studied in our research are from ourselves as ToT program developers (the authors have been involving in the development of these PToT program as well as other projects by Viet Nam NFL2020), and from the PToT course participants. Evaluation from developer perspective will be based on a conceptualization framework on ToT we developed from literature (the ideal aspect), whereas the evaluation from participant perspective will be their reflection on whether the course has met their particular expectations and needs (the actual aspect).

The study is a small-scaled qualitative on-going assessment rather than a summative, end-of-term evaluation measuring universal impacts. We believe that the rich data from qualitative method (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), together with the triangulation from various sources of data used in this study will yield findings that will be useful for the decision-making and revision of the training design, development and implementation.

Three tasks were carried out in order to fulfill the aims of the research. First, a survey was conducted to get a picture of the reality of the current primary English classroom in Viet Nam. The reality survey is based on our assumption that PToT programs have two-fold goals – they target not only at the participants who will become trainers but also at the teachers who are trained by these trainers. We thus paid classroom visits to three primary schools, interviewed teachers, and studied secondary sources including related research and public media. The second task is to construct a framework conceptualising ToT elements drawing on prominent characteristics of ToT courses identified in literature. This framework serves as a reference point for our evaluation discussion from the viewpoint of programme developers. Our third task involves interviewing nine participants from the North and the South of Viet Nam who attended P1 and P2 to investigate the extent to which the courses have met their needs and expectations. The findings from these three tasks together inform our evaluation of the PToT programmes in question.

Primary English Language Teaching in Viet Nam: The Diverse Picture

English language teaching in Viet Nam has traditionally been characterised as being grammar-based and exam-oriented, with large classes, and lacking teaching facilities (Le & Barnard, 2009; Nguyen, 2013). In primary education, teacher quality has been identified as one major issue. Since there has been no formal college training programmes for primary English teachers in Viet Nam until recently (2011-2012), most practicing teachers, often trained to teach secondary level or higher, are perceived as lacking age-appropriate teaching methods (*Viet Nam News*, 2011). Also, according to the NFL2020 national screening report in 2013, 75% of primary English teachers do not meet language proficiency requirement (*Saigongiaiphong*, 2013).

However, the picture of reality can be described as being diverse. The landscape of English teaching in Viet Nam, including primary English teaching, seems to be an area where social equity plays an important shaping factor. The gap between urban and rural areas does not only exist in digital aspect (Nguyen, 2013), but also in teacher capabilities, student aptitude, and classroom facilities. Before NFL2020 Project, English has already been an optional subject at either grade 3 or even earlier in big cities in Viet Nam. By 2007 approximately 32.2% of the primary schools in the country were implementing Optional English Program (Nguyen, 2007). Studies by Pham (2011) and Khalifa, Nguyen and Walker (2012) suggest that in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City English teaching and learning conditions have been much improved with better qualified teachers, more age-appropriate teaching practices, and better equipped classrooms¹.

¹ Pham (2011) describes that most primary school in urban Hanoi have better conditions for teaching and learning including modern multimedia. From her study, it can be seen that although teaching effectiveness was limited by large class size, teachers are starting to use child-friendly teaching methodologies including games and contextualised practices. In Ho Chi Minh City, Intensive English Program has been implemented since 1998-1999 and in 2011-2012 two thirds of the total number of primary schools in the city has the program, according to the study by Khalifa, Nguyen, and Walker (2012). Students are assessed using international standard exams. Most students on this program are from more well-off families. Among the 113 primary teachers

For our study purpose we conducted five classroom observations in three primary schools in the central and suburban areas of Hanoi between April and May 2014. At these schools the starting grades for English are different, either in grade 1, 2, or 3, depending on whether English is an optional or compulsory subject. The textbooks used also differ: two schools use textbooks by international publishers while the third uses the new Ministry of Education's locally produced textbook. All classrooms are well-equipped with modern facilities including computers, interactive whiteboards, projector screen, and computer-lab. The focus of all lessons was on pronunciation, speaking, listening, and vocabulary. Despite the large number of students (50-60 students) and the rigid setting of rows of chairs and desks, all the teachers observed made their best in creating interactive learning through the use of games, competitions, pair/group work, role-play, with the aid of computerized animation. The learning motivation was high and fast-paced with students doing their tasks enthusiastically, and the teachers used simple English as the instructional language for 60-70%, sometimes even up to 80%, of the lessons. We then interviewed eight primary English teachers from these schools and from other surrounding provinces to get a better picture. Most of them have university or college education in pedagogy. Although they were not initially trained to be primary English teachers, they all have participated in numerous seminars and workshops on textbooks, new methods and techniques, and technology in teaching English provided by the Ministry of Education and their provincial Department of Education. They have also attended short courses offered by pedagogic universities, by their own schools, and by the British Council or the US Embassy.

In more remote, low-resource areas of the country the picture is, nevertheless, not that positive. For example, in the Mekong River Delta province of Tien Giang most primary schools do not have appropriate classroom conditions for English learning (Le, Nguyen, & Huynh, 2014). There is little out-of-class

studied, 81% have university education, 100% have teaching qualifications 48% of which have international teaching qualifications (TKT, CELTA, Delta). It was also noticed from their research that the teaching practices teachers are using include age appropriate strategies such as using rewards and smileys, interactive tasks, and assessment for learning.

exposure to English, and this also has a negative impact on teacher's proficiency skills. Within the national language screening for teachers in 2013, only 11% of primary English teachers in the province of An Giang passed the test (Tuoitre, 2013).

Again, the social-economic situation has significant impact on how English teaching and learning is shaped and the picture of reality needs to be seen from multiple angles. In urban areas of Viet Nam, the teaching and learning environment is currently much better and teachers are quite competent and doing their best to optimise conditions for learning.

Training-of-trainers: Three Prominent Features

A ToT approach for professional training has been employed across a range of fields including education, communication, and medication as an effective, cost-efficient way to multiply the impact of a particular approach (Hong, 2012; Ray, Wilson, Wandersman, Mayer, & Katz 2012; Reinbold, 2013; Shah, Varia, Rahul, & Jain, 2012). As participants attending ToT programmes cascade what they learnt to a new audience, this converted pyramid model ensures training for many beneficiaries. ToT is often an option in countries where there is a need to train large numbers for the development of the service or industry (Dobson, 2007).

Regarding purpose, content structure, and implementation, ToT programs can be characterized as having three main features. Through an analysis of a number of ToT programs (Dobson, 2007; Hawkins & Catalano, 2004; Hong, 2012; Ray et al., 2012; Reinbold, 2013), we found that ToT's foremost aim tends to be *capacity building*. In ToT the targeted goals often go beyond the immediate achievement of participants: they are expected to obtain the knowledge and skills needed in order to effectively and confidently train others (Ray et al., 2012). In other words, the expertise transferred through ToT is not only the ownership of particular content knowledge but also the capacity to further cascade that knowledge.

This aspect of *capacity building* of ToT accommodates the next feature of ToT courses: they often combine *knowledge and skills*, and *theory and practice*. In the ToT course syllabus we studied, learning goals are often formulated in these two binaries: the background knowledge, skills and practical experience; concepts and techniques contained in the training; instructional design and learning theory and hands-on delivery experience. For example, the goals are put as: “to give new trainers the background knowledge, skills and practical experience” (Hawkins & Catalano, 2004, pp.1-2), teacher trainers need to consider providing the knowledge of “What we teach” and “How we teach” (Dobson, 2007, p. 99), “ToT participants need to achieve an adequate level of expertise in the concepts and techniques contained in the training” (Ray et al., 2012, p. 416), instructors/trainers need to be provided with “instructional design and learning theory and enough hands-on experience in delivering instruction” (Reinbold, 2013, p. 244). ToT thus interprets its goal of building capacity through prioritising both trainer’s expertise achievement and their ability to successfully transfer the expertise to others.

Given this second feature, participants on ToT programmes are often expected to fulfil different roles: they need to acquire the knowledge and demonstrate the skills targeted, while taking a lead role in passing on this expertise. Consequently, in developing and implementing ToT programmes *needs analysis*, *support and follow-up*, and *evaluation* are often emphasised. Besides an alignment with external required goals (Luneta, 2012), proper participant selection and local needs analysis are crucial for later success of the training (Hawkins & Catalano, 2004; Hong, 2012). On-going review and evaluation, including follow-up, when happening continuously will help improve the programme and provide just-in-time, built-in support and facilitation to trainees during their training (Hawkins & Catalano, 2004) and when they try out new practices (Hayes, 2012). Continuous support for participants can also create opportunities for active learning and professional collaboration (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis 2005; Luneta, 2012). Figure 2 illustrates our conceptualization of the structured framework of ToT.

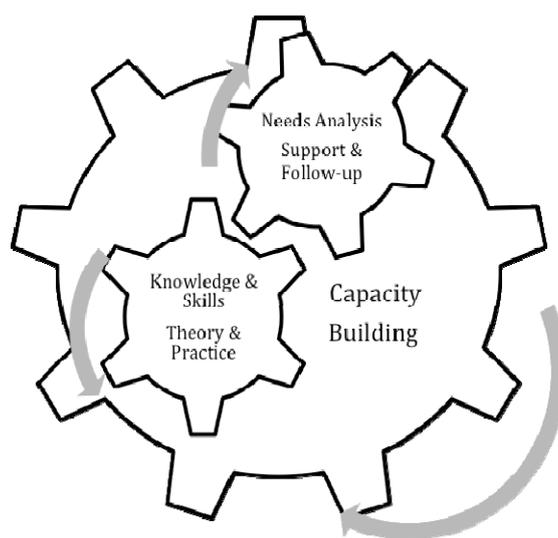


Figure 2. Three interconnected elements of ToT programmes

The Two PToT Programs in Viet Nam: Insider Perspectives

Both programmes recruit their participants from universities. P1 does not have clear criteria for participant selection – only “university teachers”, while P2 recruits participants based on considerations of their teaching competences and experience in teacher training and primary education.

While P2 follows a slightly more integrative approach in presenting core contents, both P1 and P2 are structured in line with the key domains of Viet Nam’s English Teacher Competencies Framework (officially approved in 2012), and they cover the following areas: Young Learner Learning and Teaching Methodology, Professional Development for primary English teachers, and also a Teaching Practicum at a local primary school. The main modes of delivery are group-based activities, short lectures, demonstrations, and practice sessions. Participants’ reflective learning is encouraged through

discussions and journal writing. There is however very little explicit content on workshop design and delivery skills and almost nothing about adult learning theory in the syllabus. The cascade happens mostly through observation in both courses, participants observe key trainers delivering the workshops, and in P2 the cascade is through the orientation session where key trainers share their practical experiences before the participants try out what they have learnt. P2 also has more follow-up support for participants through occasional training-room observation by key trainers.

To find out what participants think about the courses, nine participants who attended either P1 or P2 were interviewed. The four questions asked focus on *before* and *after* the PToT participants had the training: 1) What knowledge and skills in this area they already had *before* the training? 2) What do they think they need and expect to have *before* the training? 3) How do they think their needs were met *after* the training? 4) What are the challenges they had *when they delivered their own workshops*? Information obtained from Questions 2 and 3 will reveal participants' subjective evaluation, while Questions 1 and 4 provide objective insights which complement findings from Questions 2 and 3 in assessing how the courses have satisfied their needs.

The PToT Participants *before* the Training: Limited Experience, Great Expectations, and Simple Realisation Approach Preference

All nine PToT participants are university English teachers of four to 14 years' experience. Most have some knowledge of primary education and first-hand experience teaching English to young learners, but mainly obtained informally, e.g., from their experience working as part-time primary teachers in private language schools or through their small talk exchanges with the teachers of their children. Four participants have attended several short courses and workshops on TEYL provided by their private schools, the British Council or international publishers. Only three participants have some experience working with primary teachers but mostly on English proficiency.

The participants expressed their needs before they started the course:

acquiring the content knowledge of TEYL, learning how to design workshops which meet the needs of primary teachers, getting the knowledge and skills of teaching and assessing adult learners, and learning about the reality of TEYL in Viet Nam. Examples of their concerns are, “I need to know more about TEYL”; “I don’t know what textbooks the teachers are using, so I will not be able to refer to them”; “The teachers will definitely be very different from each other, but I don’t know what the differences will be like.” They wished to be trained in a practical, learning-by-doing way (“Key trainers should use simple, non academic language”), and given materials support: “We need handy materials such as course outlines, slides, training manual or notes for trainers.” They also hoped through PToT training they would be able to establish some collaboration with primary teachers for example through school visits.

Our data suggests that before starting PToT courses, although the participants did not have much experience in teacher training and in TEYL they started to anticipate the challenges and difficulties once they become trainers. If we think of the three prominent characteristics of ToT discussed earlier, it can be seen that the needs they identified are about building their capacity as a trainer with adequate expertise in both knowledge and skills. They also anticipated that learning about their target trainee audience – the primary teachers, would be among the priorities. They, however, wanted a simple approach: they showed little interest in theory and preferred hands-on with a rather ‘spoon-feeding’ approach of support.

The PToT Participants *after* the Training: Course Satisfaction and Actual Challenges

The overall evaluation of the interviewees about the PToT courses is positive. The most highly satisfied point is how their knowledge of TEYL has been improved. Participants reported that they were able to re-organise their TEYL in a more systematic way (“I have a better picture.”); they got the knowledge of TEYL from theory and practice (“I like the way the theory was translated into concrete techniques.”) Thanks to some school visits during the training they

started to have a better view of primary English teaching. They liked key trainers delivery methods especially when key trainers clearly explained the course contents and discussed ways of delivering each module, the problems that could arise and how they might be solved. The participants also enjoyed being consulted by key trainers on the course design and contents (the modification was mostly simplifying).

What the PToT participants were not very satisfied with is theory content of the training, and consequently how to further transfer that content. They wished they better understood the theory, and wanted to be able to adapt theory in their own materials. They were not totally confident about training using some PToT modules since they did not understand them thoroughly (“some modules are still full of theories, theories like the ones in the methodology course books used to teaching university students”). They also felt they did not have the needed competences (“You yourself need to have some talents and creative minds to teach teachers how to use songs, stories and poems”).

About the problems or difficulties in their own training sessions after the PToT courses, most of the interviewees expressed concerns about their lack of knowledge of the primary teachers. “Some teachers have quite low proficiency level. We had to use Vietnamese.” However, it turns out that the reason why primary teachers were not interested is not only because of their low level. One interviewee from Ho Chi Minh City said during her workshop her teachers “left the training room” because they claimed they had already attended a similar course. The pressure to pass the proficiency course (which runs parallel with TEYL course) is also a reason why the teachers undervalue the training. These disappointments cause a “low level of motivation of both the trainers and the teachers.” The interviewees also described their difficulties in designing and delivering the workshops. They thought their materials were still too theoretical and ‘bookish’ to the teachers they train. One interviewee said some teachers came up to her in her workshop saying, “Trainer, what you’re teaching us works only in the book. You can hardly do it that way in reality.” How to work with adult learners is also what the interviewees find challenging: “The training classes were too large with mixed learners: young and old, enthusiastic

and unwilling, experienced and inexperienced, active and inactive.” The interviewees also expressed their disappointment about the lack of follow-up support for teachers: “There were no follow-up activities so we don’t know if the teachers could apply and were allowed to apply these innovative methods into their own teaching.”

Evaluation Analysis

Despite the satisfaction with the two programmes expressed by the participants, there remain several issues that need to be considered to further improve the two courses.

In terms of *PToT capacity building*, active learning and reflective activities applied in the two courses did enable participants to develop themselves professionally, and this can be one of the main factors leading to participants’ successful acquisition of TEYL knowledge. It seems that, however, the two programmes prioritise developing participants’ TEYL field of knowledge above their teacher training expertise. This is similar to the belief that often instructors and trainers do not have enough formal training on course delivery and design (Reinbold, 2013).

Our analysis shows that the ‘training-the-trainer’ content in P1 and P2 mostly interpreted itself following the ‘learning-by-doing’ principle with participants observing and experiencing the training provided by key trainers. ‘Learning-by-doing’, however, may not be sufficient since participants need to understand the theory basis to be independent trainers (Reinbold, 2013). Although the participants were satisfied with this simple, practical approach, they also appreciated it when key trainers explained how each module worked. The data indicated that the challenges mentioned the most are how to cascade knowledge to primary teachers. Such problems as the lack of knowledge about the primary teachers trained and the difficulties managing and motivating teachers could be avoided if participants were provided with knowledge of adult learning as well as designing and delivering skills e.g. needs analysis and

(training) class management. In addition to the use of informal training techniques such as experience sharing opportunities as seen in P2, workshop design and delivery theory and practice should be provided more explicitly and formally so that participants can really ‘own’ these skills.

Regarding *content structure*, at present much emphasis is on hands-on, practical knowledge of TEYL and little on theory including TEYL theories and instructional design and learning theory. Although this fulfils participants’ expectations for a “simple, non-academic” approach, it is noticeable that they also requested ready-made handouts, slides, and notes. In our case this could mean a low confidence of participants in becoming trainers. Nevertheless, although a hands-on approach with little theory could be helpful when participants need to transfer the knowledge to teachers, as trainers, they do need solid theoretical basis in order to independently train others. Theory in teacher education, if well sense-made, allows teachers’ knowledge to be understood and acted on within the context of real teaching (Johnson, 1996). Likewise, relevant conceptual knowledge will enable trainers to be flexible in diverse training situations. In other words, in ToT, future trainers need to be provided with not only the fish but the fishing rod as well (Vu, 2012).

The data collected in this study reflects the findings of other studies (Hayes, 2012), suggesting that there is a mismatch in perspectives between key trainers and trainers, and also between trainers and teachers related to prior capability and classroom needs. It seems that P1 and P2 have been developed based on the common belief that Vietnamese primary teachers have a very low level of methodology expertise and seldom have professional development opportunities. Our survey and the participants’ feedback show that the reality is more complex given the urban-rural gap. *Needs analysis* is therefore crucial for both PToT programs and primary teacher training programs. Although P1 and P2 were designed based on situation analysis, a more significant part of the content should be on primary teacher training. Proper needs analysis might also help key trainers and trainers to map out their courses with other CPD activities while keeping themselves updated in the field of contemporary primary English teaching and primary teacher education.

Also, this study has indicated that sustainable *follow-up* is an area that needs to be enhanced. In-school follow-up is crucial in maximising the impact of teacher training (Hayes, 2012) and this can also apply to teacher trainer training. Our findings show that follow-up needs to be included in the design of ToT courses so participants can learn about and practice this expertise. Follow-up support activities for trainers as seen in P2 (training observation) should be expanded. Professional networks and community for ToT participants once they have become trainers could also be another option.

Concluding Remarks

The findings from our study suggest that the two ToT programs to train the trainers for primary English language teachers currently implemented in Viet Nam have overall been able to meet the needs of their participants especially in terms of TEYL knowledge. The two programs have also paid attention to ways to transfer this knowledge to the participants through a reflective and interactive approach. However, our analysis also shows that the programs at the present seem to view their participants as *learners* rather than *future trainers*. A hands-on, learning-by-doing approach proves to be effective in visualising the knowledge of training, but in the long run, a more explicit focus on trainer competences and skills will be more sustainable. Contents including adult learner and learning theories, course design, and training delivery could therefore be a suggestion for the future revision of these programs. Also, the design and implementation of these programs may also take into account the diverse realities of primary English teaching and learning in Viet Nam so that both ToT trainers and participants can adjust their training to the corresponding target training contexts. These constant reflections will no doubt contribute in many ways to the realisation of the country's large scaled plan on primary English teachers training and education currently and in the coming years.

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