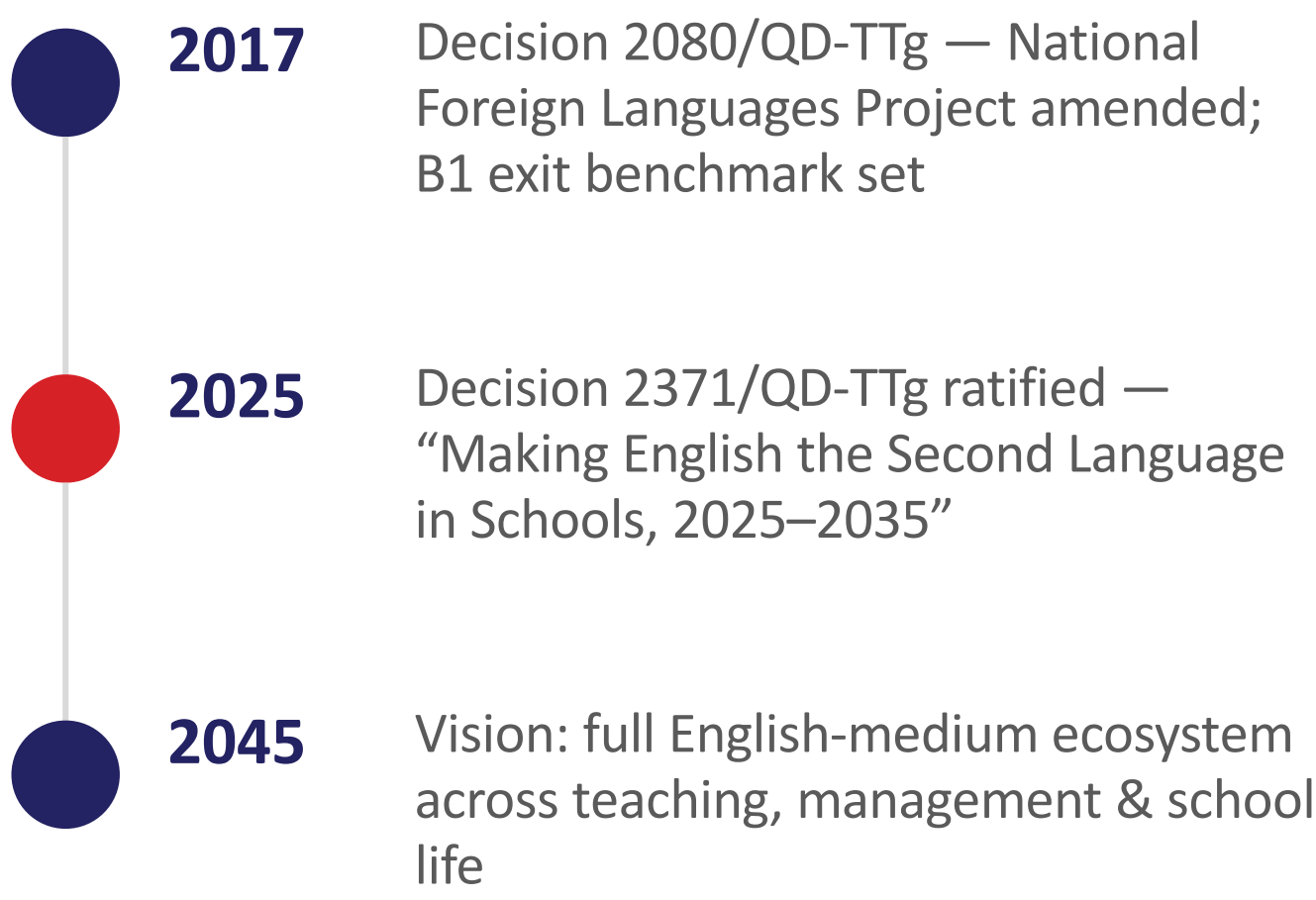


Teacher Cognition in the EFL-to-ESL Transition: Beliefs and Agency in Vietnam

Dr Ngoc Giang Tran · Director, English Linguistics Programme, Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) · ngocgiang.tran@hnue.edu.vn

1 Background & Framework

Vietnam has moved from an aspirational policy direction to a ratified national roadmap: Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg (2025) commits schools to make English a second language by 2035, building on the 2017 National Foreign Languages Project amendment.



Research Questions

RQ1 What are the core beliefs of Vietnamese educators regarding the EFL-to-ESL transition?

RQ2 How do teachers negotiate their professional agency within institutional constraints?

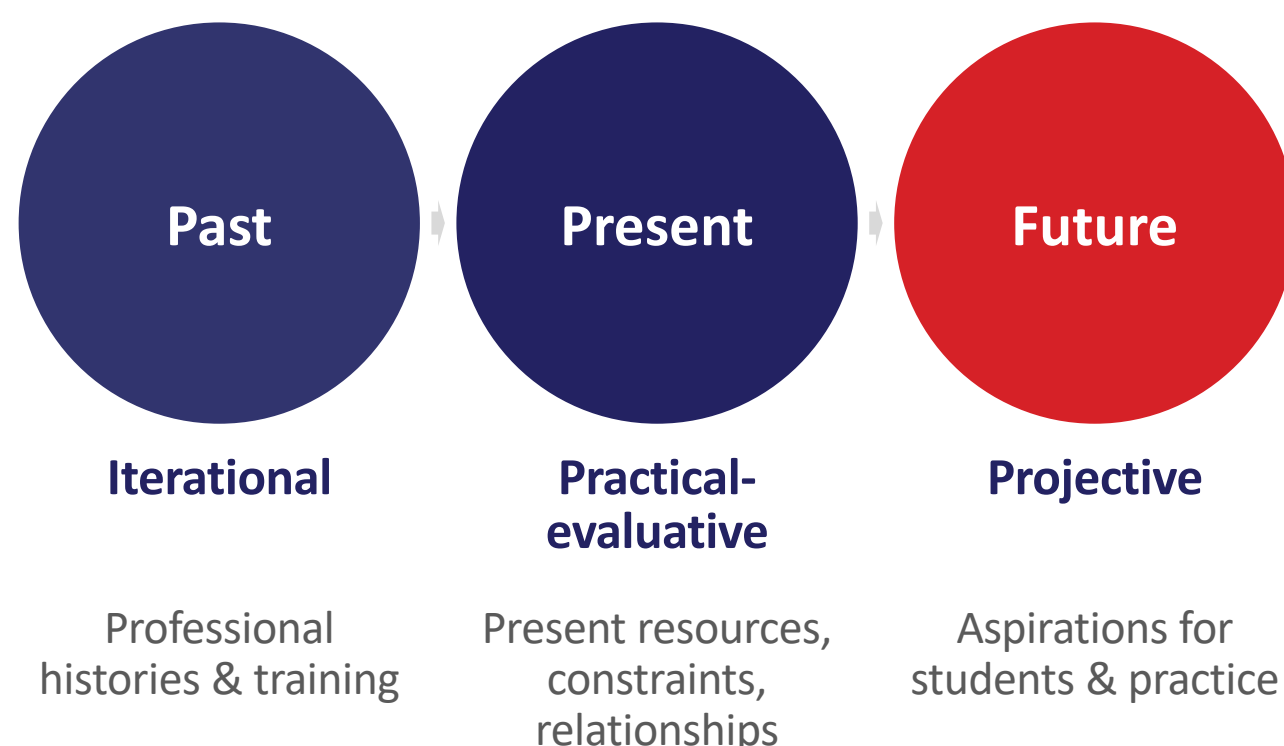
Theoretical Framework

Teacher Cognition (Borg, 2006)

Teachers as active decision-makers: an “unobservable” layer of beliefs and prior experience filters how new policy is received.

Ecological Agency (Priestley et al., 2015)

Agency is achieved, not possessed — through the interplay of three temporal dimensions:



World Englishes & Washback

A single ESL “standard” sits in tension with plural varieties (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2006) and with the washback of high-stakes exams on classroom practice (Cheng, 2005).

2 Methodology

Explanatory sequential mixed methods: a quantitative survey (Phase 1) maps broad patterns; narrative interviews (Phase 2) explain and deepen them.

PHASE 1 · Survey

5-point Likert scale · 20 items · Beliefs, self-efficacy, support, agency
n = 35 of target N = 150

PHASE 2 · Narrative Inquiry

Semi-structured “storying” interviews, 60–75 min · 5 protocol parts
N = 10 teachers,

Interim Sample Profile (n = 35)

69%

teach in schools (26% language centre, 6% university)

66%

hold a BA in ELT (17% MA TESOL/Applied Ling.)

M = 4.8 yrs

average teaching experience (SD = 3.7; range 0.5–16 yrs)

94%

have never taught/lived in an English-speaking country

Interim sample skews toward schools/language centres rather than tertiary settings; findings below are preliminary and will be updated as recruitment continues.

Analysis

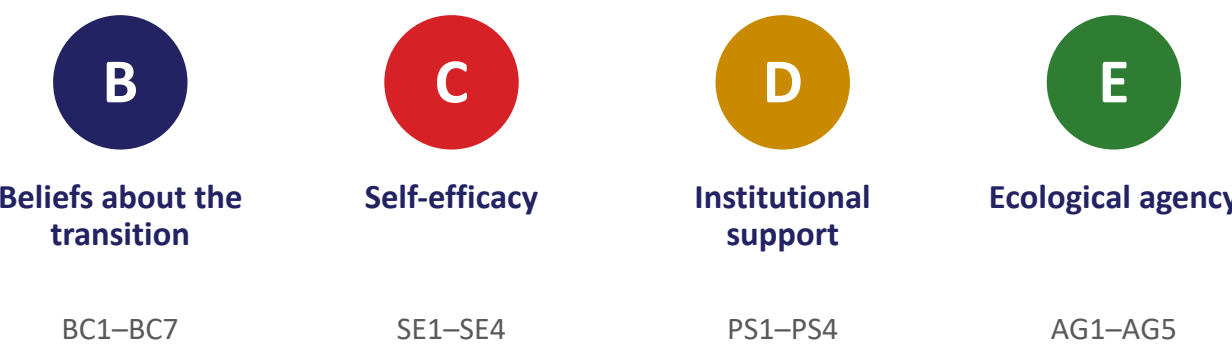
Phase 1: descriptive statistics (means, SD) per survey item.

Phase 2: thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), hybrid deductive–inductive coding against Borg’s cognition codes (A1–A5) and Priestley et al.’s agency codes (B1–B6).

Emergent: one new inductive code added (C4 — Generational Agency Divide).

Reliability: second-coder check (target $\kappa > 0.80$) planned once full sample is collected.

Survey Instrument — 4 Sections

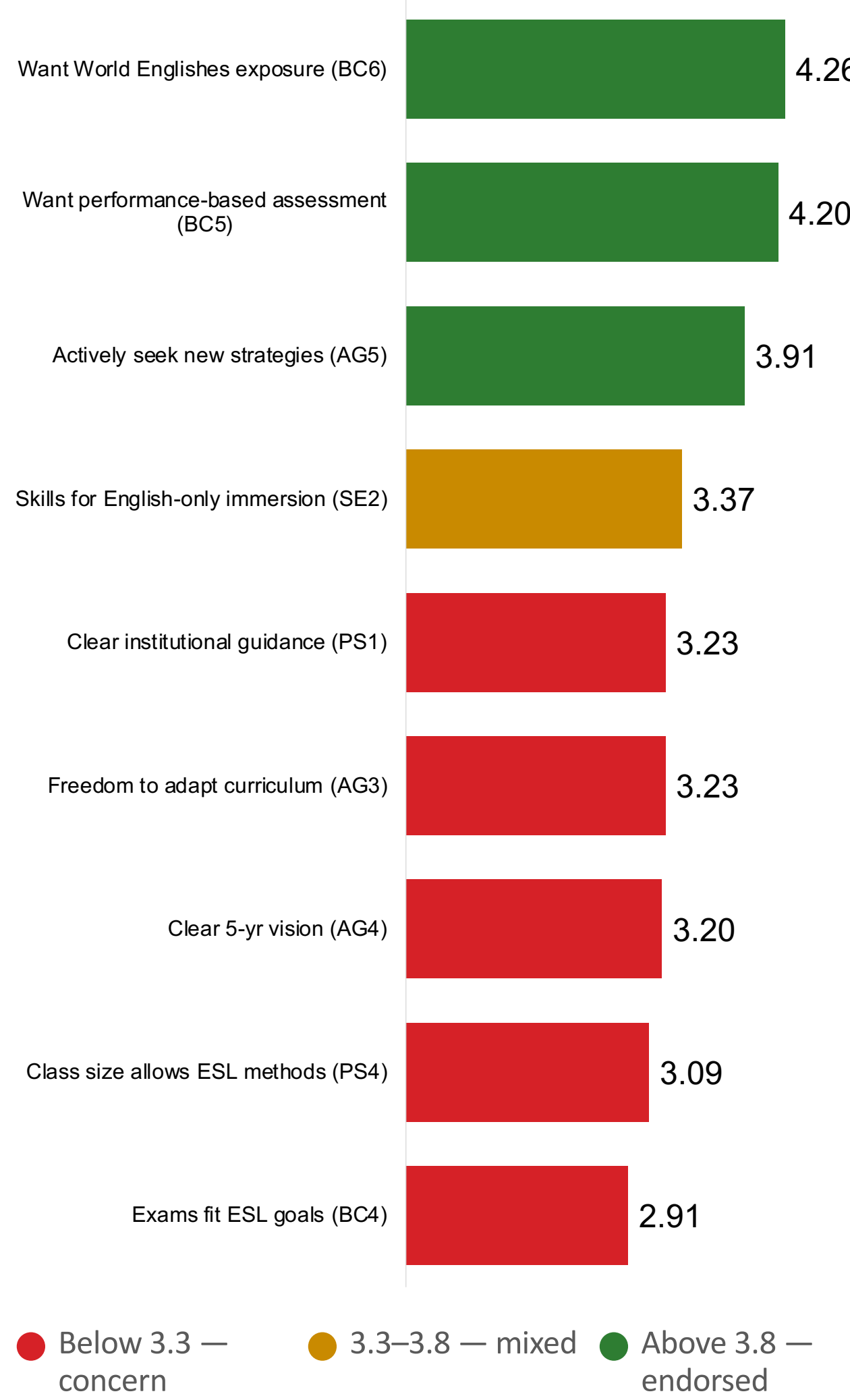


Ethics & Consent

Written informed consent obtained from all participants; pseudonyms used throughout; audio recordings deleted after transcription and member checking.

3 Preliminary Findings

Item means from the interim survey (n = 35), lowest to highest agreement:



Qualitative Themes (T1–T10)

1 Cognitive Dissonance around Assessment

All ten teachers described exams rewarding grammar/reading while the ESL vision calls for spoken communication — the “tail wagging the dog.”

2 Agency as Individual Workaround

Teachers reclaim agency informally — community storytelling, restructured assessment, unofficial forums — often at the cost of mild administrative friction.

3 Support Experienced as Rhetorical

Institutions “celebrate innovation” in mission statements while class sizes, workload, and legacy frameworks stay unchanged.

4 Locally Specific “Language Ecology”

Rural teachers face infrastructure scarcity; urban university teachers face rigid evaluation systems — barriers are not uniform.

5 Generational Agency Divide (emergent)

Early-career teachers feel isolated among skeptical seniors; veterans feel caught bridging policy rhetoric and an unchanged exam system.

4 Discussion & Conclusion

“Teachers endorse the ESL vision and act on it individually — but the assessment system, not willingness, is the main brake on the transition.”

What This Means

RQ1 — Beliefs: teachers back performance-based, plural-variety ESL goals but judge current exams poorly aligned — consistent with washback theory (Cheng, 2005).

RQ2 — Agency: practical-evaluative agency is enacted individually and informally, extending Priestley et al. (2015) and mirroring earlier Vietnamese findings (Le et al., 2020; Nguyen & Bui, 2016).

Emergent: career-stage may pattern agency as much as resources do — worth testing at scale.

Implications for Practice

Sustained communities of practice and coaching, not one-off training (Strand 5).

Assessment reform is likely the single largest lever for reducing dissonance.

Locally differentiated support — infrastructure in rural areas, structural flexibility in universities.

Limitations

Interim n = 35 (target 150); skewed toward schools/language centres, not tertiary.
Self-report data; single-coder qualitative analysis (reliability check pending).
Purposive interview sample — not yet a population-level claim.

Conclusion

The transition’s central obstacle so far is structural misalignment — between what reform asks of classrooms and what assessment still rewards — not a lack of teacher buy-in.

Selected References

- Borg S (2006) Teacher cognition and language education: research and practice. Continuum, London
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Cheng, L. (2005). Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study. Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 157–181. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40264515>
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.
- Le, M. D., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Burns, A. (2020). English primary teacher agency in implementing teaching methods in response to language policy reform: A Vietnamese case study. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 22(1–2), 199–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2020.1741209>
- Nguyen, H. T. M., & Bui, T. (2016). Teachers’ agency and the enactment of educational reform in Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 17(1), 88–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2016.1125664>
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury.
- Prime Minister of Vietnam. (2017). Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg on the adjustment and supplementation of the National Foreign Languages Project for the period 2017–2025.
- Prime Minister of Vietnam. (2025). Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg approving the project “Making English the second language in schools for the period 2025–2035, with a vision to 2045.”

Full working paper, instruments & codebook available on request — ngocgiang.tran@hnue.edu.vn