

Attitudes and Expectations of Khmer Ethnic Student-Teachers Majoring in English Education toward Participation in VSTEP for their Professional Development

Nhut Minh Tran^{1,2}

¹Faculty of Education, An Giang University,

²Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract

Research into Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) student-teachers' attitudes and expectations toward participation in VSTEP for their professional development. This paper reports a descriptive research to explore the attitudes and expectations of Vietnamese EFL student-teachers' on the development of profession when taking part in a professional contest like Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) in Mekong Delta. The researcher utilizes the combination of qualitative methods and quantitative methods to validate the data and provide more detail information from 25 EFL student-teachers who are belong to Khmer ethnic participate. The findings reported in this paper provide deep insight into the English student-teachers' attitudes and expectations toward participation in VSTEP for their professional development in the future and will significantly contribute to research on teaching professional development and professional competences of Khmer ethnic students majoring in English pedagogy in Vietnam.

Keywords: professional development, Khmer ethnic student-teachers, English teaching, VSTEP.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the significance of Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) in the educational field for high school teachers who have to get the fifth level in Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Within the Vietnamese context, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) on 11 March 2015 has put a great emphasis on the reform of education through the examination of VSTEP for high school teachers. This is set at C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), or the equivalent on Vietnam's

five-level framework of foreign language proficiency which was adapted from the CEFR. Teachers can take suitable proficiency tests, or tests produced by their institutions, to demonstrate this requirement. VSTEP is a national test designed to suit the English language use context in Vietnam.

Although several studies have shown the effects of VSTEP on teaching and learning quality, little is shown about its effects on Khmer student-teachers' English profession developments within the context of teaching and learning like the West South of Vietnam. This is the special group of students because they are Khmer ethnic and face many problems in learning English, particularly much more difficulties than Vietnamese students in Kinh ethnic. This paper therefore timely provides the opportunity to investigate further how Khmer student-teachers' attitudes and expectations are toward participation in VSTEP in Mekong Delta. Besides, this study offers insights into the extent to which VSTEP influences on EFL student-teachers' profession. The current study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How does participation in VSTEP affect on student-teachers' professional development?
2. How are student-teachers' attitudes toward participation in VSTEP in Mekong Delta?
3. What are student-teachers' expectations toward participation in VSTEP in Mekong Delta?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 VSTEP

VSTEP stands for Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency. This is the first standardized English proficiency test in Vietnam. The test specifications and format were developed by language testing experts from the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. It was released

nationally under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) on 11 March 2015. VSTEP targets adult test takers for a range of general English proficiency purposes in Vietnam. However, one of its primary uses is in the proof of English ability for high school teachers with a C1 level of proficiency. English majors are required to demonstrate higher levels of proficiency, and so the test targets level C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The CEFR which was put together by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" between 1989 and 1996. Its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing which applies to all languages in Europe. In November 2001, a European Union Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability. The six reference levels are becoming widely accepted as the European standard for grading an individual's language proficiency.

2.2 Professional development

Professional development of teachers should take a performance oriented perspective, with an "emphasis on the meaning of professional development for the quality of education, in the sense of fostering educational performance and educational effectiveness". The National Staff Development Council (NSDC; 2001) stresses that professional development is rapidly being viewed as high-quality ongoing training programs with intensive follow up and on the job support. Recent studies that focused on the professional development of teachers tried to combine a variety factors. According to the study of Guntermann (1993), Badri and his colleagues (2017), and Al-Mahrooqi (2015), the construct of professional developments includes knowledge and understanding of my subject field(s); pedagogical competencies in teaching my subject field(s); knowledge of the curriculum; student evaluation and assessment practice information and communications technology skills for teaching; student behavior and classroom management; school management and administration; approaches to individualized learning; teaching students with special needs; teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting; teaching cross-curricular skills; approaches to develop cross-occupational competencies for future work/studies; and new technologies in workplaces student career guidance and counseling. Using path analysis (Garet et al., 2001) showed that main features of the Professional Development Program such as content focus, and active learning had a significant relationship with teachers' knowledge and skills.

In addition, the researchers (Badri et al, 2016; Badri et al, 2017; Tabatabaee-Yazdi et al, 2018) recommended that to meet the needs of teachers' professional development, policy makers and school

leadership should find it necessary to put forward effective plans to encourage teachers' participation, as well as to guarantee that their exact cognitive needs are met. Many goals should be aligned. For example, teachers' needs for professional development should match the broader strategic and tactical goals of school development. Moreover, teachers' professional development should be balanced and coordinated with school systems related to appraisal and feedback. However, a rigorous examination should be conducted with the effect of various professional development engagements and the expected impact of such participation.

2.3 Student-teachers' attitudes toward VSTEP as professional development

In Vietnam, the importance of English was further reinforced by a Government Report to the National Assembly, which detailed measures for the implementation of a strategic scheme for foreign language education at the national level (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2006 cited in Ton and Pham, 2010). The assessment of foreign language proficiency has beneficial effects on teaching and learning. According to Davies (1985), the bouncing effect of the test will be positive if the test promotes teaching and learning. The researcher also reports that so as to achieve maximum efficiency, there should be no difference between language learning activities and exam preparation activities. As a result, teachers begins to pay attention to increase their English proficiency as well as have awareness to their professional development in the changing world because it is necessary to fill in the gaps in the skill sets of teachers, and to continue to mature the teachers' expertise (Evers et al., 2016; Guntermann, 1993). It is also essential to keep the teacher up-to-date with the continuously changing practices, and learners' needs. Moreover, most of teachers have started to trend to improve their English proficiency through VSTEP (Le, 2017). It means that VSTEP helped student-teachers to gain better understanding of the English ability and provided them with the opportunity to review English skills in general as well as to increase their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English. Given this, they understood how to apply their English skills in VSTEP and apply these skills in teaching English. Ton and Pham (2010) found that the proficiency test is one of the important factors to help teachers to increase motivation in teaching and learning English. They have more targets for teaching career as well as progressive attitude in training generations of students. Through interviews, the researchers (Badri et al, 2016) found that the teachers test results had no direct personal impact on them, the teacher became more comfortable and fearful, so the effect of the test also dropped.

In addition to the many positive effects of the VSTEP test on English language training and management, there are a number of impacts that need attention from managers. VSTEP caused a certain pressure for teachers in their teaching progress. Some respondents said that the standardized output of 5/6 (6-point foreign language capability framework for Vietnam) or C1 (European Reference Framework) is too difficult and stressful for the teacher. Thus, some teachers feel dissatisfied with the English exam preparation program as well as the technical examination (Nguyen, 2017).

2.4 Student-teachers' expectations toward VSTEP as professional development

Phuong (2017) explores both teachers' and students' expectations in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam as an EFL setting long considered educationally disadvantaged compared to the national average. What is more, Phuong (2017) and Nguyen (2017) pointed out difficulties in conducting the national foreign language project, including a number of goals set too high compared to the ability to perform; the capacity and professional pedagogy of the instructors have not met the requirements. Besides, providing an efficient means of supporting and obtaining teachers is vital to creating a quality learning environment for learners and a useful work atmosphere for teachers (Al-Mahrooqi et al, 2015; Badri et al, 2016; Badri et al, 2017). Moreover, policy makers gradually focused on enlightening the educational system through the application of school accountability measures that focused on teacher qualifications. Therefore, one of the pedagogical expectations in the educational setting is that teachers, to be successful, should be highly qualified. It should be have the need to create criteria for the content of language teacher education with the aim of developing new possibilities and effective teacher educational models (Guntermann, 1993), which has been one of the most important concern of educators, teachers, and trainers. Amzat (2017) reported that providing motivations for teaching and learning by a principal had a strong effect on teachers' awareness of their students' background, hobbies, interest, and so on. In addition, it should provide a guide for teachers' success, and administrators who wish to conduct and implement teacher professional development programs (Tabatabaee-Yazdi et al, 2018).

According to Le (2017), for teachers, it is necessary to revert to Level C1 (or Level 5) for this purpose is not realistic. As the English language environment is virtually absent, student-teachers' English proficiency is deteriorating, especially in rural and mountainous areas. In addition, student-teachers expect that it will strengthen international cooperation in teaching and learning foreign languages such as encouraging educational institutions to expand and diversify forms of

international cooperation with organizations in native countries or national languages suitable for teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam; Facilitate foreign teachers to participate in foreign language training in Vietnam (Ton and Pham, 2010).

2.5 Previous study

The development of the VSTEP has been a major undertaking, and from the outset, was intended to not only develop the first nationally available standardized proficiency test produced in Vietnam, but also to build language testing expertise and capability (Dunlea et al., 2016; Nguyen and Do, 2015). Less has been published in English on the development and validation of the test, with documentation remaining largely as internal reports. However, the results of ongoing collaborations with international researchers have been presented at a number of international, peer-reviewed conferences, including: at the 2015 Language Testing Research Colloquium in Toronto (Tran, Nguyen, Dang, Nguyen, Nguyen, Huynh, Do, Nguyen, Davidson, 2015) - which included information on the alignment of the test to the CEFR; at the New Directions in English Language Assessment Conference in Hanoi (Carr, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, 2016); and at the Fourth Asian Association for Language Assessment Conference in Taipei (Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Thai, Bui and Carr, 2017).

3. Materials and Methods

The researcher follows the descriptive approach to give descriptions about the importance of VSTEP and exploring student-teachers' attitudes and expectations toward VSTEP participation. The researcher utilizes the combination of qualitative methods and quantitative methods to validate the data and provide more detail information.

The questionnaire is the first data collection instrument. In the research, the participants are asked to show their answers on a five-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire will be conducted in Vietnamese version to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding because the participants are not English native speakers. It consists of two parts developed based on the clusters from the framework established by the literature review. Part A will be involved in the participants' personal information including gender, age and educational background. Part B focuses on student-teachers' attitudes and expectations toward VSTEP participation. The quantitative data were collected and analyzed using the computer software Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

The second instrument is interview. It provides participants with an opportunity to elaborate on their answer, to discuss their interpretation of the world and to express how they see situations from their own perspective (Gay, Mills

& Airasian, 2012). Therefore, the interview will bring more insights into the research findings participants' attitudes and expectations toward VSTEP. Each interview lasts an average of 10 minutes. The interview will be composed in Vietnamese and prompts are prepared to elicit the responses in cases the participants could not provide a proper answer (for detailed information, see Appendix).

The selected participants resulting in 25 Khmer ethnic student-teachers majoring in English education at universities in Mekong Delta. This is a special sampling because they are required to learn 3 languages at the same time including Khmer, Vietnamese and English. All of student-teachers used to participate in VSTEP or gained to English proficiency equivalent to level three in CEFR. Among them, 14 student-teachers are female (56%) and 11 student-teachers are male (44%). Their age ranges from 21 to 23.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative results

4.1.1 The effects of participation in VSTEP on English competence

Student-teachers' perceptions to the effects of VSTEP on their English competence were explored with eight questionnaire items (for detailed information, see Appendix 1). Table 1 shows the mean score was found at a high level ($M=4.15$). This indicates that VSTEP has positive effects on student-teachers' English competence.

Table 1 The effects of participation in VSTEP on English competence

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
English competence	25	2.63	5.00	4.15	.623
Valid (listwise)	N 25				

4.1.2. The effects of participation in VSTEP on teaching English

Table 2 shows the mean score ($M=3.68$, $SD=.886$) of student-teachers' perception about the effects of VSTEP on their English teaching. This indicates that student-teachers perceived attending to VSTEP has positive effects on their English teaching.

Table 2 The effects of participation in VSTEP on teaching English

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Teaching English	25	1.38	5.00	3.68	.886
Valid (listwise)	N 25				

4.1.3. Teachers' attitudes toward participation in VSTEP

Table 3 shows the mean score of teachers' attitudes toward participation in VSTEP was found at a high

level ($M=3.47$). This indicates that teachers had a positive attitude and perception toward participation in VSTEP.

Table 3 Teachers' attitudes toward participation in VSTEP

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Teachers' attitudes	25	1.88	4.75	3.47	.791
Valid (listwise)	N 25				

4.1.4. Teachers' expectations toward VSTEP for English proficiency and professional development

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the mean score of student-teachers' expectation toward VSTEP for English proficiency and professional development at a high level ($M=3.56$). This supports the conclusion that student-teachers perceived the contribution of VSTEP in building English proficiency and professional development.

Table 4 Teachers' expectations toward VSTEP for English proficiency and professional development

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Teachers' expectations	25	1.50	5.00	3.56	.918
Valid (listwise)	N 25				

4.2. Qualitative results

Through the survey of student-teachers' attitudes and expectations toward VSTEP participation by interview, the majority of student-teachers have positive attitudes toward VSTEP. Obviously, VSTEP helps student-teachers to develop their profession because the effects of participation in VSTEP on English competence and the effects of participation in VSTEP on teaching English.

4.3. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions. The first question the findings from the present study was indicated that student-teachers use knowledge and skills from VSTEP to organize, understand, and apply information to achieve a variety of purposes and outcomes after participating in the test. The effects of participation in VSTEP on teaching English was perceived that student-teachers can improve English skills and use English as a tool to create activities in teaching effectively; self-evaluate English ability in teaching; test and assess the training process. The findings from this study support the conclusion of studies by Amzat (2017), Shohamy (1992), and Davies (1985) who indicate that by participating a proficiency test, teachers tend to increase their English proficiency and have awareness to their professional development.

Regarding the second question, the findings from the present study was sought to investigate how

student-teachers' attitudes toward participation in VSTEP in Mekong Delta. Analysis from the questionnaire reveals that VSTEP had positive effect on student-teachers' viewpoint. These findings are consistent with those of a study by Evers and his colleagues (2016), who indicate that proficiency test could be used to improve student-teachers' pedagogical performance. These authors also claim that when participating in a proficiency test, student-teachers focused on English skills, format and content of the test, and relationships between English proficiency and teaching competence, thereby maximizing the potential motivation of English teaching.

Appropos of the third question, the finding from questionnaire and interview analysis show that there are different expectations in professional development from student-teachers toward VSTEP. In particular, a number of student-teachers hope that the test is based on the system of testing and assessment in teaching and learning foreign languages of Vietnam in the direction of integration with international standards. This stance matches work by Le (2017) who claims that after each VSTEP test, the researchers of can conduct a small survey to get the opinions of contestants to evaluate the test that properly reflects their competence and is suitable for the program they have learned. In addition, the authors (Le, 2017; Phuong, 2017) suggest that detailed scores should be provided and that the results are reliable and fair to the examiners and users of the test results.

Moreover, VSTEP is known as a standard which encourages student-teachers' self-exploration and teaching control, incorporated with their existing knowledge. Thus, in teaching and learning process, student-teachers are challenged to create encouraging environment with the content relating to VSTEP for students to explore. This findings matches work by Badri (2016), who claims that proficiency test might limit the teachers and learners to whatever content, organization, or style is dictated by the organizer.

Contemporarily, VSTEP offer student-teachers opportunities of meeting the needs of high-quality professional development to advance instructional capability. This leads to several benefits which are also known as the promotion of active teaching and practicing the skills further. As a consequence, it helps enhance performance during the teaching process.

5. Conclusions

In the context of Vietnam, the initial assessment of the effects of the VSTEP test when introduced as a measure of foreign language competence of student-teachers is very necessary and important in ensuring quality. This research study is significant because of many reasons. First, it is increasingly important to direct our attention to VSTEP examination. Secondly, it raises awareness to student-teachers

toward VSTEP in their professional development process, especially Khmer ethnic student-teachers. Next, student-teachers' attitude and expectation towards VSTEP participation has been a fashionable research topic investigated in many studies in the last decade but it has been neglected in Vietnam. Thus, the present study is intended not only to shed more light on student-teachers' attitudes toward VSTEP participation but also to reveal the factors obstructing their positive attitudes. Through Khmer ethnic student-teachers' attitude toward VSTEP, it can gain insights into student-teachers' perceptions in Mekong Delta so that they find a wide range of benefits to their professional development in the future. The findings also show that although there are many differences and difficulties in teaching and learning English, Khmer ethnic student-teachers get positive expectations for developing their teaching profession. The more obstacles they have, the more expectations they can get.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. If there is a comparison between VSTEP examination and others (Seameo or Cambridge), which one will you like best? Why?
2. According to you, what are some advantages and disadvantages of VSTEP?
3. Do you think VSTEP helps you to increase your professional development? Why?
4. Are you interested in participation in VSTEP if you have not still achieved C1 level? Why?

Acknowledgments

We would like to send my profound thankfulness to students (Khmer ethnic student-teachers majoring in English education at universities in Mekong Delta) for their assistance with our data collection though they are busy with their studying.

Reference

- [1] Al-Mahrooqi, R., Denman, C., Al-Siyabi, J., & Al-Maamari, F. (2015). Characteristics of a good EFL: Omani EFL teacher and student perspectives. *SAGE Open*, 5(2), 215824401558478. doi: 10.1177/2158244015584782
- [2] Amzat, I. H. (2017). Principal 7 instructional leadership practice and its effect on teachers' reflective practices. *Teacher Professional Knowledge and Development for Reflective and Inclusive Practices*, 192, 70-88.
- [3] Badri, M., Alnuaimi, A., Mohaidat, J., Yang, G., & Rashedi, A. A. (2016). Perception of teachers' professional development needs, impacts, and barriers. *SAGE Open*, 6(3), doi: 10.1177/2158244016662901

- [4] Badri, M., Alnuaimi, A., Yang, G., Rashidi, A. A. & Sumaiti, R. A. (2017). A structural equation model of determinants of the perceived impact of teachers' professional development - The Abu Dhabi application. *SAGE Open*, doi: 10.1177/2158244017702
- [5] Carr, T. Nathan, Nguyen, T.N. Quynh, Nguyen, T.M. Huu, Nguyen, T.Q. Yen, Nguyen, T.P. Thao . (2016). Systematic support for a communicative standardised test of proficiency in Vietnam. Paper presented at the 4th New Directions in English Language Assessment Conference. Hanoi, Vietnam.
- [6] Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Council of Europe (2011). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Council of Europe.
- [8] Davies, A. (1985). *Language testing symposium: A psycholinguistic approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W. (2012). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (10th ed). Boston: Pearson.
- [10] Dunlea, J., Nguyen, T.N. Quynh, Nguyen, T.M. Huu, Nguyen, T.Q. Yen, Thai, H.L. Thuy, Nguyen, T.P. Thao (2016). Reporting on the pilot phase of a test comparability project. Paper presented at the 4th New Directions in English Language Assessment Conference, Hanoi, Vietnam, October.
- [11] Edwards, J. (1991). Evaluation in adult and further education: a practical handbook for teachers and organisers. *Workers' Educational Association*.
- [12] European language levels - Self Assessment Grid. Archived from the original on 28 January 2017. Retrieved from <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/sites/default/files/cefr-en.pdf>.
- [13] Evers, A., Van der Heijden, B., & Kreijns, K. (2016). Organizational and task factors influencing teachers' professional development at work. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 40, 36-55.
- [14] Guntermann, G. (Ed.). (1993). *Developing language teachers for a changing world*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- [15] Le, V. C. (2017). Proposed adjustment of English language teaching and learning objectives in high school in Vietnam. *VietNamNet*. Retrieved from <https://baomoi.com/dat-cap-do-cl-o-giao-vien-tieng-anh-la-muc-tieu-khong-thuc-te/c/23209556.epi>
- [16] National Staff Development Council. (2007). *Professional development*. Retrieved from <http://www.NSDC.org/connect/about/index.cfm>
- [17] Nguyen, T. L. (2017). The effects of the English proficiency test under output standard on teaching and studying English at university of foreign languages - VNU, Hanoi. *Journal of Foreign Studies*, 33(4), 122-136
- [18] Nguyen, T. N. Quynh, Nguyen, T.Q. Yen, Nguyen, T.P. Thao, Thai, H.L. Thuy, Bui, T. Sao & Carr, T. Nathan (2017). Using multiple approaches to examine the dependability of the VSTEP speaking and writing assessments. Paper presented at the 4th Asian Association for Language Assessment Conference, Taipei, Taiwan .
- [19] Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. (2009). *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)*. Paris, France: Author.
- [21] Phuong, Y. (2017). Improving English Language Teaching in Vietnam: Voices from University Teachers and Students. In Y. Shimura (Ed.), *The People of Vietnam: Their Voices and Lived Experiences*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- [22] Shohamy, E. (1992). Beyond proficiency testing: A diagnostic feedback testing model for assessing foreign language learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 76(4), 513-521.
- [23] Tabatabaee-Yazdi, M., Motallebzadeh, K., Ashraf, H., & Baghaei, P. (2018). Continuing Professional Development Strategies: A Model for the Iranian EFL Teachers' Success. *SAGE Open*, 8(1), 215824401876423. doi: 10.1177/2158244018764234
- [24] Tran, P., Nguyen, H., Dang, T., Nguyen, M., Nguyen, L., Huynh, T., Do, H. Nguyen, H. & Davidson, F. (2015). A validation study on the newly developed Vietnam standardised English proficiency test. Poster presented at the Language Testing Research Colloquium. Toronto, Canada.
- [25] Ton, N. N. H., & Pham, H. H. (2010). Vietnamese teachers' and students' perceptions of global English. *Language Education in Asia*, 1(1), 48-61. Doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5746/LEiA/10/V1/A05/Ton_Pham