Constraints of Hierarchy on Meso-Actors' Agency: Evidence from Vietnam's Educational Language Policy Reform

Authors: Elizabeth Shepherd & Lisa McEntee-Atalianis

Biographical note:

Elizabeth Shepherd worked for the British Council for 13 years and is currently a PhD candidate studying at Birkbeck, University of London.

Lisa McEntee-Atalianis is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck, University of London. In recent years her research has focussed broadly on issues of 'identity' at micro- and macro-linguistic levels (as evidenced in her recent book *Identity in Applied Linguistics Research,* 2019, Bloomsbury) and on language policy and planning in international and supra-national organisations, with a special focus on the United Nations.

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Abstract

This paper contributes to recent discussions of levels of agency in Language Policy and Planning (LPP) research. It specifically aims to understand the role and importance of meso-level actors as arbiters of policy implementation (Johnson & Johnson, 2015). It argues that, whilst understanding of both macro- and micro-agency has grown over the past decade, little is understood about the experience of meso-level agents. The paper seeks to address this by focussing on the LPP context in Vietnam; in particular, the implementation of the 2008 National Foreign Languages Project 2020. It explores the undertheorized and yet important socio-cultural context in which educational LPP takes place. Contrary to previous research (Johnson and Johnson, 2015) which found that language policy arbiters can, in some cases, possess a disproportionate amount of power, this paper shows how Governments and institutions can act to limit rather than empower meso-level agents. The thematic analysis focuses on how meso-level agents perceive their role and the extent to which the setting in which they work impacts on their capacity to act. The paper argues that lack of information and support for meso-level agents participating in language policy implementation significantly constrains their ability to facilitate policy change.

1. Introduction

In his discussion of paradigmatic shifts in the field of language policy and planning (LPP), Ricento (2000, p. 206) asserts that "the key variable which separates the older, positivistic/technicist approaches from the newer critical/postmodern ones is agency, that is, the role(s) of individuals and collectives in the processes of language use, attitudes and ultimately policies." Indeed, agency is acknowledged as a critical variable (alongside *inter alia* ideology and ecology) in the development of LPP theory and in the successful implementation of policy (Ricento, 2009). Although, for some years, the influence of individuals on LPP has been recognised as important (e.g., Canagarajah, 2002; Cooper, 1989; Davis, 1999; Freeman, 2004; Haarmann, 1990; Hornberger, 2006; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Shouhui & Baldauf, 2012; Spolsky, 2009), agency has been of comparatively marginal interest until recently (see reviews in McEntee-Atalianis, 2016 and Zhao, 2011).

Discussion of agency in LPP research arises from a long-standing and still unresolved debate in the social sciences (e.g. cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Giddens, 1991; Marx, 1971) as to whether individuals are free and capable to act and think as they desire; or whether their actions and subjectivity/identity are constrained by forces/power structures internal or external to themselves (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006 and McEntee-Atalianis, 2019 for discussion of the agency/structure dualism). Accounts differ, leading to a tension between, on the one hand, depictions of the subject as autonomous and self-determining; capable of self-reflexivity, change and resistance. Or, conversely, as subordinate and subject to external economic, political and socio-cultural conditions. Gidden's theory of 'structuration' defines

agency as 'something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (1991, p.52) within locally-managed social inter-(action). Agency therefore involves mediation. We take the view that agency becomes manifest in interaction with others: 'talk can be both manifest and reproduce material power relations' (Burr, 2003, p.190) and it involves: 'the capacity to make choices and to act upon them' (Burr, 2003, p. 201).

Since the third wave of critical LPP study, research in the field has explored how agents impact policy implementation at three broad levels: macro, meso and micro. Writing in 2006, Baldauf suggested that 'over the last decade language planning has taken a more critical edge and its ecological context has been given greater emphasis, leading to an increasing acceptance that language planning can (and does) occur at different levels …. This shift has also led to a rethinking of agency' (Baldauf, 2006, p.147). Since this time, micro-agency has been explored in increasing depth, for example, exploring the agentive role played by teachers in the classroom to reinterpret national language policy (Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011; Trudell & Piper, 2014), or implement new forms of pedagogy (Diallo & Liddicoat, 2014; Liddicoat, 2014). Many cases studies have explored the role of teachers as 'final arbiters of language policy implementation' (Menken, 2008). To date, limited LPP research has focused on the intermediary role played by meso-level agents. The nature of this undertheorized and under-researched area of LPP agency sits hand in hand with the lack of a clear definition of meso-level agency to draw upon directly. Indeed, as contended by Johnson and Johnson (2015) meso-level agents constitute a wide range of individuals who are yet to be understood in any great depth, rendering a definition unclear. Nevertheless, the importance of investigating meso agency has been stressed. Skerrett (2016) suggests that understanding meso-level practice will enable a more complete appreciation of how

the macro translates into micro, i.e. how meso-level actions are impacted by macro-policy frameworks, which micro behaviour, in turn, draws upon.

Despite this lacuna, there are a small number of studies of meso-level agency in the research literature, each presenting their own designation of meso-level agency, relating to relevant individuals or organisations, in slightly different ways. For example, in an investigation of academic language policy and planning in an English medium instruction university setting, Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2016, p.74) define 'meso-level ALPP [academic language policy and planning] as that which is driven within and by universities.' A slightly different perspective is presented by Miranda, Berdugo, and Tejada (2016) who describe the meso-level as corresponding to national level policies in Colombia. Designed by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) at macro level and subsequently implemented by universities, who in this context represent the micro-level perspective. Similarly, a study by McMenamin and van der Walt (2018) focuses on the regional implementation of European language polices, using the meso-level descriptor to capture national level implementation of regional EU-derived policy. The literature suggests, therefore, that the construction and analysis of meso-level agency in LPP research is highly context specific, relative to the identification of macro and micro constructs within the site of study.

Considerable focus on agents, levels and processes of LPP, has surrounded the study of language policy in educational contexts. Baldauf and Kaplan (2005) highlight the unique nature of the educational LPP setting, suggesting what they described as seven interrelated policy goals, specific to Acquisition Planning. These are: access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methodology and material policy, resourcing policy, community policy, and evaluation policy.

They describe the explicit and consistent heterogeneity of education institutions and the imperative, therefore, of agents at meso- and micro-levels to address several of these policy goals simultaneously. Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2014), writing on micro LPP processes in a selection of case studies including school level implementation of government policy, identify four broad ways in which local agents work: (i) by locally implementing macro-level policy; (ii) by contesting, appropriating or resisting macro-level policy; (iii) by making efforts to address local needs in the absence of macro-level policy; and (iv) by taking initiatives that open up new opportunities for developing multilingualism.

Johnson and Johnson (2015) explored the educational language policy context of the Washington State school system in the United States, and the role of meso-level agency therein. They argued that meso-level language policy arbiters possess a disproportionate amount of power relative to other individuals within a layered policy implementation structure. They propose the theoretical 'Language Policy Arbiter Model', with their analysis focusing on how beliefs about language, language education, and educational research impact the decision-making of individuals identified as language policy arbiters.

Also addressing the educational language policy context, Harklau and Yang (2019) suggest that whilst previous research in this area has correctly identified the crucial role of educators as arbiters of policy, it has tended to undertheorize the important socio-cultural context in which they are situated, and more specifically educational institutions themselves. They suggest that rather than possessing a disproportionate amount of power, agents operating in educational contexts can be constrained by the institutional hierarchy within which they sit. They draw upon

new public institutional theory (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2018) to address this gap in LPP research. New public institutional theory highlights the importance and impact of individuals' actions and choices within the institutions in which they work. However, they also acknowledge the impact that institutions can have on individuals' actions and choices, stressing the influence of 'professional and cultural norms in shaping collective institutional priorities and behavior' (Harklau & Yang, 2019, p.4). In their analysis, Harklau and Yang focus on one strand of new public institutional theory, described as 'decision-making theory'. As articulated by this theory, educators' agentive actions are defined via their 'daily decision making'. The authors explain that individual educators 'exercise discretionary decision-making power that both shapes and is shaped by institutional priorities and norms.' The sum total of these actions, they suggest, illustrates that educators do not simply implement, or challenge, language in education policy, they 'collectively produce it' (Harklau & Yang, 2019, p.5).

The study reported in this paper seeks to build on the research discussed above, extending this theory to focus on the meso-level of policy implementation. It aims to investigate the reported experiences of meso-level agents involved in the implementation of the National Foreign Languages Project 2020, launched by the Vietnamese government in 2008. It will focus on meso-level agents' perception of their own role in supporting policy implementation and reported constraints on their own agency in achieving this. In this study the macro-level is defined as the national policy created by the government of Vietnam. Therefore, macro-level agents are the Government officials responsible for the development and writing of the policy. The micro-level is theorised in line with recent studies of national language policy implementation (as detailed above), where micro-level actors are defined as students in the

classroom, their teachers and in some cases their families (Diallo & Liddicoat, 2014; Liddicoat, 2014; Trudell & Piper, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the meso-level is defined by a group of university lecturers, trained to cascade a macro government-led teacher training programme, to teachers and students at the micro-level. Their meso-level status is defined via their role in implementing the macro-policy within the micro operational environment.

This paper aims to contribute to greater understanding of what constitutes meso-level agency and explore meso-level agents' reported role, power and actions whilst mediating macro-level policy, in (re-)producing and/or subverting broader educational and political goals and ideologies in (inter)action. It particularly seeks to investigate the unique layer of language policy implementation that meso-level agents occupy and the challenges they face in mediating between macro and micro-levels. The study is significant in exploring the constraints of hierarchical structure and institutional support on individual agency at meso-level. It is original in its exploration of meso agency in the context of the East Asian region, confronted with the significant impact of globalisation.

The paper begins in section two with an overview of the historical context of the foreign language education policy in Vietnam, including details of Project 2020 and the government's national implementation strategy. The research aims, questions and methodological design are then presented in sections three and four. Sections five and six contain the presentation of findings and discussion of the implications of this study for understanding the perceived role and constraints on meso-level agency.

2. Historical Overview of Foreign Language Education Policy in Vietnam

Since early Chinese rule in 111 BC, foreign language education in Vietnam has been inextricably linked to colonial and foreign relations and national economic performance. Chinese, English, French and Russian languages have long and complex histories in Vietnam that span over two thousand years (Wright, 2002). Between the 16th and 18th centuries the country witnessed very unstable social and political conditions, allowing various European missionaries to gain a foothold, including the Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits. Between 1945 and 1954 a great deal of unrest was witnessed throughout Vietnam after many decades of harsh colonial economic exploitation. Resistance against the French, led by Ho Chi Minh and Viet Minh, faced opposition from the invading Japanese, Chinese and British-American allies and additional incoming French troops. This period of unrest ended in 1954 with a divided Vietnam, occupied in the North by the communist regime of Ho Chi Minh, and the American-backed regime in the South. However, within his declaration of independence, Ho Chi Minh promised to 'combat famine, ignorance and foreign aggression' (Wright, 2002, p.233).

In order to address the issue of 'ignorance', revolutionaries introduced education for all, aiming to achieve population-wide literacy. National literacy was to be achieved via common use of the national language, Quoc-Ngu, as well as nationwide access to free compulsory primary schooling. Despite the political and economic difficulties at this time, the government claimed relative success, with a reported 10 million northerners becoming literate in the Vietnamese national language. French was considered a linguistic priority and was prioritised within the new system, however, the Vietnamese Communist party were offered great support by the Peoples Republic of China via aid and military assistance. Therefore, Chinese became the most desirable foreign language throughout the 1950's (Wright, 2002, p.234).

American involvement in the Vietnam War (1955 – 1975) brought the English language into the linguistic equation. However, at the end of the conflict, attempts were made to eliminate the perceived decadence of colonial cultures and re-establish the traditions of the Vietnamese people. Two remnants of what was considered colonial decadence were the English and French languages. At this time both languages disappeared from the educational system and individuals' linguistic repertoires. Increasing tensions with China in the North for a brief period also saw the Chinese language join English and French as representations of enemy nations. Post-conflict aid investment from the USSR, particularly University scholarships granted to Vietnamese students, saw an increase in the teaching of Russian in secondary schools. Wright (2002) notes that between 1965 and 1974, 26,000 Vietnamese students gained first degrees in the Soviet Union, and 3,000 postgraduate qualifications. The USSR became the most prominent supporter of impoverished Vietnam, cut off from the West by a US-led trade embargo.

In 1986, after a disastrous period of isolation and Soviet led governance, Vietnam introduced the 'Doi Moi' reform agenda that set out a period of economic liberalisation and increased contact with other countries. After ten years of liberalisation, Vietnam had developed trade relations with over 100 countries, with direct investment from over 50. Not only making huge strides in economic growth and foreign direct investment, Doi Moi 'had a profound impact on the development of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam' (Nguyen, 2017, p.33). Linguistic challenges accompanied this period of significant growth, highlighting the lack of and need for foreign language competence.

Despite the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990's, Vietnam was admitted to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, when the United States lifted its trade embargo and established diplomatic relations. Vietnam became a member of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), whose languages of communication were Chinese or English, which, at that time were rarely found in Vietnam. Foreign language learning in Vietnam has been described as 'a barometer of waxing and waning relationships with other powers' (Wright, 2002, p.226), no less acutely seen via the tumultuous geo-political history of the country presented here. As predicted by Wright in the early 2000's language learning continues to act as a barometer of social change in Vietnam and plays a central role in the country's economic and political development today.

2.1 The National Foreign Languages 'Project 2020'

Since the 1990's, when a raft of political and economic reforms swept the country, the English language was increasingly taught at all levels of public education and received further prominence via language policy reforms in the early 2000's. However, months after Vietnam was accessioned to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), a significant national language policy reform was implemented in 2008: The National Foreign Languages Project 2020. Project 2020, as it is commonly known, has been described as the 'most notable language reform of the nation' (Bui & Nguyen, 2016, p.4). The Ministry of Education policy documentation published by the office of the Prime Minister entitled 'Decision 1400; Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 – 2020', outlines the primary goals of the project as:

- improving teaching and learning foreign language within national education system;

- implementing a new national programme to teach and learn foreign languages;

- achieving the programme goals of improved foreign language skills, at all levels, by 2020, and,

- supporting the cultural and economic development of Vietnam.

Project 2020 focused on four specific actions:

- implementation of a ten-year programme (2010 – 2020) enforcing compulsory foreign language learning from Grade Three;

- implementation of a foreign language programme in vocational education;

- implementation of a foreign language enhancement programme in undergraduate education;

- improvement of the teaching of foreign languages within education at all levels.

(Presented in summary: Decision 1400, General Goal, The Government of Vietnam, Hanoi, 30th September 2008.)

The first phase of Project 2020, beginning in 2008, showed a strong commitment from the government to enhance the position of foreign language learning, with scant specific reference to English. A later iteration of the policy published in 2010 produced details of English being trialled as a compulsory subject in a selection of primary schools, introduced from Grade Three onwards. Bui and Nguyen (2016) suggested it was anticipated the government would, from this point, mandate the compulsory learning of English from Grade Three onwards in all public schools.

A strategic goal of Project 2020 has been developing teacher capacity and skills, as evidenced by the fourth overarching policy goal outlined above. However, a recent study of teacher professional development presented evidence to suggest that 90% of the 80,000 English teachers in public schools failed to reach the required English language level in standardised international tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. All were declared in need of retraining to support the policy's implementation and improve the quality of teaching (Bui and Nguyen, 2016, p.5).

The need to improve teachers' language proficiency to support implementation of the policy has continued to be evident. In November 2016 a media report communicated an official statement delivered by the then Minster of Education and Training to the National Assembly, quoting the minister as saying the national foreign languages programme was in danger of failing to meet its 2020 target, unless drastic measures were taken. The report in the *Viet Nam News* suggested that only 49 per cent of primary school teachers had met standards set by the project, and that the project had faced various challenges in its implementation, including lack of awareness of the importance of foreign languages and the need for innovative teaching methods[i]. The project timeframe and resources were also highlighted as challenging, as were inconsistencies in provincial level prioritisation of teacher training and resource allocation.

One of Project 2020's central strategies aimed at strengthening language teaching practice has been to engage with international agencies and organisations to support the development of teacher training, language curriculum and language assessment literacy and practice. The policy encourages national education institutions to explore international partnerships with organisations from native English-speaking countries. This is in order to '*perform cooperation*

and exchange programs that involve foreign teachers in language training at colleges and universities in Vietnam' (Decision 1400, The Government of Vietnam, Hanoi, 30th September 2008). Amongst several 'solutions' presented to support operationalisation of this strategy is specific reference to the use of international training partners to support the quantity and quality of teachers needed. The strategy is intended to involve the recruitment of a wide pool of teachers and professors from Vietnamese institutions, at all levels. They will then be encouraged to '*take up international trainings either inland or abroad that are internationally accredited;* [in order to] *enhance capacity and training quality at current colleges and universities that specialized in foreign languages; expand to establish language departments at some colleges and universities that are qualified; focus on developing network of language institutions that train language teachers at undergraduate level at regions in the Northwest, Northeast, Central Highland, Cuu Long delta'* (Decision 1400, The Government of Vietnam, Hanoi, 30th September 2008).

As evident in this excerpt (taken from the government policy document), the macro-level intention to support the national implementation of Project 2020 was to involve the recruitment of existing teachers and professors from the language departments of Vietnamese colleges and universities. These existing specialists identified by the ministry, were required to take part in training provided by international specialists, such as the British Council. The aim was to enhance their individual language teaching capacity and form a network of institutions able to cascade training to qualifying primary-level language teachers, and develop the skills of existing teaching staff.

Several international agencies, such as the British Council, Cambridge English and American English, have worked with the Project 2020 team to deliver teacher training initiatives. One specific cascade training programme, the Primary Trainer of Teachers (PToT) course, delivered by the British Council in Vietnam between 2009 – 2014, was identified as the focus of this study. Throughout the lifespan of the PToT course, 189 teacher trainers from 22 universities and colleges of foreign languages, primary English specialists from departments of education and training, and existing language teachers, were selected from 17 provinces to take part. The PToT course consisted of 240 hours of training, divided into four phases. It involved the development of practical working knowledge of young learner methodology, the development of teaching plans and materials, and delivery of teacher training workshops to local primary teachers. With the expectation that trainers who had participated would go on to support national teacher capacity building amongst local teachers using a 'cascade teacher training' model. Each trainer who took part in the PToT course went on to train and support dozens of new and existing primary-level language teachers.

It is this macro-level policy implementation strategy, to harness existing meso-level capacity (University staff) to train micro-level agents (schoolteachers) in order to successfully implement Project 2020, that provides the motivation for this study.

3. Aims & Research Questions

Interview data was gathered from university lecturers, who were involved in the meso-level policy implementation, in order to explore the impact of the macro-implementation strategy and the practice of 'cascade teacher training' as designed and delivered by international partners. The

intention was to understand how these individuals understood their role and how this impacted on their actions as they negotiated their role in between macro and micro-levels.

The following research questions were addressed:
- How is the role of the meso-level actor perceived and understood by the participants?
- How is the role of the meso-level actor reportedly shaped by their institutional/University setting and what impact did this have (if any) on their agentive capability?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants & Data Collection

The data reported in this paper were drawn from ten semi-structured interviews lasting on average 30 minutes in length. These were carried out between September and October 2018 on site at four higher education institutions in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in Vietnam. To ensure regional representation from the north and south of the country, participation was prioritised with institutions from different geographic locations. Recruitment of participants was facilitated by the British Council in Vietnam, who originally delivered the PToT training course. An introductory request was sent by the British Council Education Programme Coordinator in June 2018 to PToT course attendees. A group of approximately 20 individuals were sent an introductory letter describing the context of the research study, along with a biography of the researcher (the first author) who would be conducting the interviews. The initial letter requested expressions of interest to participate within the study during a specified time period of

approximately two weeks. Twelve expressions of interest were received. From this initial group, ten were taken forward due to logistics and participant availability.

The ten university academics identified as meso-level agents, within this defined context, (see Table One below) were both senior and more junior academics. However, all were tasked to deliver the same training programme and were therefore considered as equals in their performance of this role. Note too (see Table One) that some junior academics were working towards or held equivalent or more advanced qualifications to those holding senior management positions at their Universities.

Table 1: Informants

Participant	Academic role	Gender	Highest level qualification	Institution	Location	Interview Duration
P1	Lecturer	Female	MA	Hanoi University	Hanoi	42.58
P2	Lecturer	Female	MA	Hanoi University of Education	Hanoi	25.45
P3	Lecturer	Female	PhD candidate	Hanoi University of Education	Hanoi	32.32
P4	Lecturer	Female	MA	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	20.00

P5	Vice Dean	Male	PhD	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	22.52
P6	Lecturer	Female	MA	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	23.19
P7	Lecturer	Female	MA	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	24.05
P8	Vice Dean	Female	MA	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	35.11
P9	Lecturer	Female	MA	Sai Gon University	Ho Chi Minh City	19.31
P10	Lecturer	Male	MA	HCMC University of Education	Ho Chi Minh City	40.47

Due to the interviewer not being proficient in Vietnamese, all participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in Vietnamese using an interpreter and/or for the interview to be conducted in English. All participants expressed a preference to be interviewed through the medium of English. Participants demonstrated varying levels of English proficiency. Several question areas were developed prior to the interview and formed into a discussion guide, to fulfil the purpose of the study overall. Discussion topics relevant to the research questions presented in this paper related to:

- their knowledge and awareness of Project 2020;

- their knowledge and awareness of their role as defined within the policy documentation, as a cascade teacher trainer;

- the impact of their institutional setting/'day job', on their role as a cascade teacher trainer

- their reflections on the current success or failure of Project 2020.

However, as is usual in such qualitative research (Johnson, 2018) informants were free to expand on issues and/or discuss other issues of relevance if they wished.

4.2 Data Set and Thematic Analysis

The data set analysed consisted of just over five hours of recordings (see Table One for breakdown per informant). All recordings were transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis. Primarily, a deductive approach was taken to the thematic analysis performed. Once immersed fully in the data, a top down approach was taken, deriving codes and themes from within the data based on the original research hypotheses (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). A phased approach to the thematic analysis was performed. The first phase consisted of familiarisation with the data, in the first instance via transcription of the original audio recordings, then via reading and re-reading the textual data. The second and third phases involved generating initial codes across the data set and searching for emerging themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing emerging themes to ascertain the quality of the theme, i.e., whether it had clear and distinct content boundaries in relation to other themes identified and whether there was enough data to support its investigation. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the final themes, ensuring the unique and specific content of each theme, and identifying

specific excerpts from the data in support of each theme (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019, p.67).

The thematic analysis described was enabled using Nvivo12 software to organise and manage the analysis process. Having transcribed the original audio content in text files, these files were uploaded into the software, where initial coding was carried out. Following this process, a node structure was designed to allow for consistent coding across all data files and the collection of specific textual references from all interview files on themes identified.

5. Findings

The themes that emerged in the analysis included:

- participants understanding of Project 2020 and their role in its implementation;

- the role of the British Council training in providing information on the macro policy context;

- the challenge of inadequate macro policy communications on meso-level capability;

- the meso disconnect from micro practice, and

- the impact of their university settings on their mediated capacity to act in an agentive role.

Each of these themes are considered below. Purposive sampling was employed to narrow down the selection of examples presented in the results section below (Silverman, 2015). Each excerpt has been selected due to its representativeness across the data set.

5.1 Informants understanding of Project 2020 and their role in its implementation

Excerpts from the macro-level policy documentation, described in section 2 above, show clearly the government's ambition to implement a national cascade teacher training programme. As noted, these programmes were delivered in collaboration with international agencies and were designed to enhance existing capacity at colleges and universities already specialising in foreign languages. The policy describes the intention to develop a network of training institutions at various locations throughout the country.

Therefore, one of the main roles of meso-level agents, as defined within the policy documentation, was to support the implementation of the macro-level language policy. However, it became apparent that there was a significant absence of engagement with, or understanding of, the formal macro-level policy documentation by the informants interviewed. Without exception, all declared that they had not read, or seen, the Decision 1400 document first-hand, as illustrated in the accounts by P9 and P2:

> **P9: "I just read from a newspaper. It's not very clear. If I see the policy? I did not. I can say that. I heard people said a lot of Project 2020. This is the first thing I've heard, I mean, that is [a] fact all the teachers are required to achieve C1 or B2 at English level. That's all."**

> **P2: "No. I haven't seen."**

The relative seniority of informants (detailed in Table One) within each university setting, their position as either a junior or senior lecturer or Vice Dean, had no bearing on their exposure to

formal policy content. Furthermore, interviews conducted with more senior academics revealed their explicit understanding and acceptance of their own lack of power to mediate change or influence policy at the macro-level. This was due, in large part, to their own previous experience dealing with hierarchical power structures within their institutions throughout their career. Moreover, the educational background or longevity of service within their institutional role did not appear to impact on their exposure to the details of the formal policy.

When probed further on why they had not seen or read the document themselves, their responses suggested that informants did not believe this was important to them in their role or would have had any bearing on their professional capacity or role as a cascade trainer. They also did not believe that access to the document had been restricted, or that they believed other colleagues within their institution may have had advantageous access to it. There seemed to be general acceptance that their role was one of practitioner, (as illustrated in the extract below), and, as such, the government policy aims would not be explicitly spelt out to them, e.g.:

> **P1: "Probably I'm not very sure that I know because I think for us as a teacher, our levels is not like-- there's nobody going to clarify the policy for us. It's more for us as the person going to do the practice. So we going to know that the aim of the whole project is to improve the quality of the teachers. And we know that as the teacher-trainer what we should do in order to help the other teacher to bridge that qualification kind of thing. But I don't think that there's anybody going to explain to us that. Tell this is the whole projects and this is the document for that project, and in that document, that thing that going on over here. It's not going to be that clear."**

5.2 The role of the British Council training in providing information on the macro policy context

Therefore, when informants were asked about their understanding of Project 2020, it became apparent that they were, in large part, introduced to it via a third party, i.e. through their participation in the British Council PToT training programme. Interview data revealed that participants understood their role as being responsible for teacher training. They accepted and acknowledged that they would not be directly party to information on the macro-level policy document or the background context surrounding its formation. They also accepted that any contact with macro-level (Government) agents responsible for its formation would not allow for greater scrutiny or in-depth understanding:

> **P4: "And I only learned about Project 2020 in 2012 when I took part in the English course. Yes. And I know that there is a project called 2020."**

> **P2: "The thing with Project 2020 I had no chance working with the DOET [regional education ministry] really, I have to say the truth, but I had no chance to working with the DOET."**

Indeed, unbeknownst to informants, the policy documentation makes reference to the government's intention to harness existing foreign language expertise within Vietnam to support the policy goals and grow teaching capacity. However, it seems that participants within this

study had little or no knowledge of this specific goal. Rather the goals of Project 2020 were mediated via the British Council and reinterpreted through the aims of the PToT training course, as specified by P1 below:

P1: 'Yeah, because for me, the Project 2020 start with the PToT courses with the BC.'

P4: 'I just heard about that [Project 2020]. And I was sent to the training course taught by British council as one part of the Project 2020. Really, I don't know any details of the project.'

5.3 The challenge of inadequate macro policy communication on meso capability

Within the PToT course training guidelines, produced by the British Council, there is explicit emphasis on the requirements of participants to become cascade trainers of Project 2020 teaching methods to primary-level English language teachers. This is described as 'enabling [them] to develop the knowledge and skills to become trainers of primary English teachers.' (British Council, Primary Trainer of Teachers' Course, Phase 1, Module 1 training materials). The content of the training focused on participants' understanding new classroom pedagogy and communicative language learning methods.

The role of the cascade trainer, as described within the macro-level policy, and communicated via the British Council led training course, was to train primary language teachers via a cascade model. Each meso-level agent reported being responsible for training tens or hundreds of

teachers, in multiple cascade training sessions, throughout the country. The interview data revealed that, in order to be effective in their role, interviewees felt it was important to already have a degree of 'buy in' at the micro-level, i.e. by the language teachers they were expected to train. This, they stated was more effective, however, if prospective teachers had some prior knowledge or understanding of the goals of Project 2020. They reported that in many instances this was not the case, due to a lack of communication by the Government of the overall policy objectives to a wider public audience, and more specifically to primary teachers themselves:

> **P5: "And, I mean, that's the communication. It's not so good. So should be publicized by the media. And they don't understand, of course, but Project 2020 should know how to publicize the information so they can support through the language learners ….."**

The data revealed that informants felt more could be done at macro-level to communicate the expectations of Project 2020 to the teachers and beneficiaries (parents and students). This would in turn support meso-level agents to successfully perform their role with regard to both the new communicative approach, (referred to as 'methodologies' in the extract below), to teaching and learning, and the expected level of proficiency students and teachers were required to reach.

> **P4: That's a good question. It's very hard to answer because I am not the policy maker. Because you know that in Vietnam, the way you teach and teaching and learning is quite different from the assessment way. So the teachers at all levels often**

try to prepare the students for their exams and tests and they maybe ignore some of

the methodologies.'

Overall, informants reported a lack of access to accurate and up–to-date policy information, and overall public visibility of Project 2020. The data suggested the absence of information led to resistance on the part of teachers. They noted that a vacuum of information was instead filled with negativity about the project overall. This prevented meso-level agents from working effectively at the micro-level. P2 notes for example how she found it extremely difficult to engage teachers and students (including those at her University) in the process:

P2: "The hardest challenge for me. The way to connect people, connecting people,

involving people into the process and try to persuade or try to communicate the

opportunities of Project 2020 to people, especially to students in my university, or

students should be one of the hardest parts."

5.4 The meso disconnect from micro practice

Interviewees further revealed that the role of meso-level actors, as intermediaries between macro policy and micro practice, was not only affected by the absence of strategic macro policy communications, but also by their own status, i.e. their educational background, their employment as highly skilled academics, and their relatively privileged urban lifestyle and experience. The latter, they argued conspired to work against them. All noted that they had limited knowledge of the challenges faced by teachers in rural contexts. This manifested itself in

different ways: firstly, their physical distance from and experience of, provincial learning environments. They noted that in provincial settings English language learning had less relevance and proved significantly more challenging. As such, the successful delivery of the cascade teaching model to an appropriate standard was very difficult to achieve, due to lower levels of language ability. Secondly, and associated with the former, was the challenge of motivating students in the classroom, who had little or no reference to the positive impact language learning may have on their education or future employment. Findings revealed a marked disparity between the metropolitan urban locations (in both the North and the South of the country) and provincial, rural, settings with regards to: teacher proficiency; student motivation to learn English and resource allocation. As asserted by P7:

P7: "… the situations are different in different local area. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City, we people learn English more. It is easier to learn this way. And of course, in some provinces where English is not so popular, I don't think it's easy. It is really a challenge."

Informants described how challenging they found persuading trainee teachers of the potential benefits of Project 2020. Their own lack of knowledge about the contexts in which teachers were working prevented them from authentically and persuasively engaging at the micro-level. Informants expressed a significant disconnect from micro-level teaching practice and their own experience as university level academics rather than as schoolteachers. As noted by P4 (below), limited practical experience within classrooms not only impacted the quality and content of the teacher training delivered but also delegitimised her role:

P4: "That is I have very little experience in the grade, in the level of the things that I can-- I think I want to say that I just have the theory, but I don't have the reality of teaching and learning in primary school or secondary school and high school. So some of my trainees may say that, "We cannot apply what you say, what you teach us in the new life because this one, because that one." I really have very little experience, reality, teaching and learning in school."

5.5 The impact of their university settings on their mediated capacity to act in an agentive role

As asserted by Harklau and Yang (2019) actors in an educational LPP context can be constrained by their institutional setting. As noted above (section 1), this contrasts with the view of Johnson and Johnson (2015) who argue that language policy arbiters hold disproportionate amounts of power within the LPP context. Data from the interviews in Vietnam support the findings presented by Harklau and Yang (2019). For example, informants reported that their participation in the language training course was not voluntary. They were selected and assigned by senior colleagues from their department within their university to take part. In most instances they knew very little about Project 2020 until that point.

P1: "Well, actually, at that period of time, we were selected from the department by the university, so it's not like I can register myself to go program. It was assigned."

P4: "Yes, I just heard about that. And I was sent to the training course taught by British Council as one part of the Project 2020. I know that though there is a Project 2020. Really, I don't know any details of the project."

Engagement in the cascade training was expected of lecturers from different disciplines within universities. Within Vietnam, English proficiency is a requirement of both foreign language majors, as well as students that intend to go on to become subject level teachers via the medium of English. Therefore, engagement in the programme was reported to be demanded across multiple departments within universities. This, in turn, required support from the university leadership in the form of facilitating and supporting cross-departmental communication and providing resources to support the training of trainers. Informants noted that support and resources were absent. The meso-level agent's capacity to perform their role was, therefore, directly impacted by lack of institutional strategy and support, as illustrated in the account provided by P5:

P5: "And not only for English language learners but also authority, university authority over here. Okay, the managers in the university and some other departments, working to become established also understand that because English language is part of the whole things and Project 2020 is not for English only. Everybody have to get involved and the problem is that we have to explain or we have to publicise the information to everybody to identify the piece. That is a challenge...Then we have to get some connection with other departments in our university only and everybody who knows the importance of university management

support with this. Yeah, very big problem"

Informants also reported that acting as champions for Project 2020 proved to be an additional burden on top of their daily responsibilities as University academics, for which they were given little or no remuneration, resources, or release from their day-to-day responsibilities. Informants stressed the difficulty of this task, and the pressures imposed by their institutional settings, in which the usual departmental level competition for funding and resources was exacerbated by an expectation that lecturers would take on the additional dual role required, i.e. to act as University academics and teacher-trainers on behalf of Project 2020. This dual responsibility proved very difficult and impacted on their ability to fully perform their expected role on behalf of Project 2020.

P1: "For us, as a teacher, we have more job to do, right. Not the regular thing that we do here the in the University, but we have to work on something very differently from the regular thing that we do here. Right now, they become the regular for us as well, but it would be very different from our experience."

Indeed, lack of knowledge about the project's requirements throughout their universities; centralisation of funding and administration; lack of consultation, senior support networks and cross-departmental collaboration within their institutions, and the involuntary nature of their role, led to de-motivation and disengagement by many, despite informants declaring overall support for the aims of Project 2020:

P8: "Personally, I think they should go there to know to learn about the policy of the Project so that they can oblige properly in our university. When I came there and learn about the Project and then I write a report to our Board of Director, but, in fact, they didn't pay much attention. But I, yeah, I have too many things to do for our department. So, of course, I don't have time or power or anything else to do other thing."

P.10: We were supposed to teach. Use the knowledge and skill we gained from the training process in order to teach the teachers in the South of the country, but then it depends the university as well. Because they will have to sign the contract with the Department of Education of each province. If they won the contract, so then we would be told to conduct the training."

In contrast, informants did not express negativity towards the micro-level agents (teachers) for whom the cascade training programme was intended. On the contrary, informants described a sense of pride and responsibility in conveying their knowledge and supporting the development of English language teaching in their assigned provinces.

P4: When I look back at what I did throughout the course, actually, I and my friends in this course can be proud of some workshop we delivered to primary teacher. And for every, I noticed that some teachers that were quite shy at the beginning. Actually, they didn't have any clear idea about what they should do in their classroom.

However, at the end of the workshop, we see that they have shaped some important style for their teaching, and they got some practice with English as well.

6. Conclusion

Previous research on the role of meso-level agency has shown that a definition of this intermediary level of agency is highly context specific (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Miranda at al, 2016; Skerrett, 2016) and under-researched. Meso-level status is defined in relation to a specific macro and micro-level setting. Findings from this study have shown how impactful context can be for meso-level agents themselves, when trying to understand or define their own role. As defined by Gidden's, agency is 'something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (1991, p.52).

Building upon our view that agency becomes manifest in interaction with others, or lack thereof, informants within this study struggled to define, understand and implement their role due to lack of exposure to formal macro-level policy information, inadequate experience, training and institutional support at the meso-level, and a disconnect with micro-level practice and implementation. Without exception, they had no first-hand experience of the policy document and goals. They did not perceive this lack of knowledge as potentially negative. Although, in practice the absence of a full understanding of Project 2020's overall objectives appeared to prevent a full understanding of the expectations placed upon meso-level agents. Thus, impacting on them in two ways: informants displayed a lack of understanding of macro-level expectations and a lack of confidence in communicating the opportunities and benefits of the project to micro-level beneficiaries - teachers and students.

Moreover, insufficient knowledge of the micro-level context meant that their training of teachers did not (for the most part) align with the needs and expectations of the schoolteachers or students. Additionally, the expectation was that this role would be executed in addition to their contracted duties and roles as university lecturers. Meso-level agents appeared, to a lesser or greater extent, to be somewhat disconnected from the levels both above and below them. Detached from both macro-level policy intention and micro-level practical implementation. Their role was prescribed by their involuntary participation within a training programme (delivered by an external body) and challenged at the point of delivery due to inadequate resources and understanding of the needs of the 'beneficiaries' of the training programme, especially in provincial contexts. Their perception of the potential impact their own role may have, and their potential as policy arbiters, was limited by both the macro and micro-level disconnect. The latter, to some extent, may explain why Project 2020 has not been as successful as the Vietnamese Government had hoped (see section 2 above).

In their exploration of meso-level agency Johnson and Johnson (2015, p.19) argued that 'language policy arbiters wield a disproportionate amount of power in how it's interpreted and appropriated', as the policy penetrates down to the school level. However, building on the language in education policy context, Harklau and Yang (2019) suggest that rather than possessing a disproportionate amount of power, agents operating in education institutions, in this case at the meso-level, are constrained by the institutional hierarchy within which they sit. Findings from this study support the latter perspective.

In the Vietnamese context, macro-level policy merely specified how existing specialists from universities would be drawn on to be trained, and, in turn, train networks of primary-level language teachers. However, the training of meso-level agents was out-sourced to international education agencies and lecturers undertook their work alongside their contracted duties. As such, it would seem that the institution in which the meso-level actor works may itself be described as potentially possessing a disproportionate amount of power, rather than the individual themselves. It was the senior personnel within the university who selected the meso-level agents and controlled the nature of their engagement with the process (PToT training and cascade teaching), without necessarily affording the necessary resources or support.

As discussed above (section 1), Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2014) identify four broad ways in which micro-level agents work in educational contexts as: implementing macro-level policy; contesting, appropriating or resisting macro-level policy; addressing local needs in the absence of macro-level policy; and creating new opportunities for developing multilingualism. Findings from this study have shown that in relation to the first of these categories meso-level agents report having to work hard to understand and negotiate their role as 'intermediaries' in LPP implementation. They report having to tackle the (top-down and bottom-up) enablers and barriers to successful policy implementation, including constraints imposed by lack of information; resources; Governmental and institutional support and experience in understanding the needs of micro-level agents.

Our findings suggest an inextricable link therefore between macro, meso and micro levels of LPP and the need for each level to understand the aims, goals and needs of the other in order to successfully achieve policy change. In the Vietnamese context, the lack of information provided from the macro-level, not only to meso-level agents, but also to micro-level stakeholders,

negatively impacted on the ability of meso-level agents to fulfil their role. Moreover, the constraints imposed by a lack of support for meso-level agents within their institutions/universities also negatively impacted on the outcomes of Project 2020s' policy implementation. Our findings identify power imbalances at meso-level, but suggest the imbalance sits, not only at the individual, but the institutional level.

Focus throughout this paper has been on the role and constraints imposed on meso-level agents. The findings suggest that future research should prioritise this level of agency for the development of LPP theory and practice; and also scrutinise the important role of the institution, in which the meso-level agent is embedded, in order to identify support mechanisms and constraints on policy success.

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