

# Teacher perspectives about English language teaching reforms in Vietnamese high schools

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

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In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issues uniform curricula and textbooks, sets goals, and implements assessments nationwide for high school schools. This means every Vietnamese public high school has to use the prescribed textbooks to teach the same content following a page-by-page schedule throughout the school year, undergo identical assessment tasks, and try to maintain similar outcomes regardless of geographical or socio-economical differences. In such a system, classroom teacher's voices are usually under-sounded and little research has been conducted on teachers' perspectives regarding these crucial components of their profession. This study presents how high school EFL teachers perceive and cope with the top-down system in terms of objectives, curriculum, methodology, assessment and outcomes in Vietnam. Data were collected from 163 teachers using an online survey on their attitudes towards the objectives, curriculum, methodology, assessment, and outcomes as determined by MOET. The results showed a discrepancy in the curricula and assessment. While the curricula emphasized communicative competence, the assessment heavily focused on forms. As a result, although some teachers tried to diversify their teaching method, they eventually focused on grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary for students to achieve satisfactory results in the national examination.

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## 1. Introduction

English gained popularity when the Vietnamese government decided to open its door to the world for economic development. English also becomes popular in the education sector when many universities and students start studying English as a compulsory subject from Grade 3. As of May, 2021 when the findings of this current study were reported, the government has changed the policies allowing many different textbooks for Grade-2 and Grade-6 students at primary and secondary schools, however, at high schools Vietnamese secondary education system is managed by the central government or (MOET) in terms of curricula, course books, syllabi, teaching methods, and assessment by guidelines and mandated high school textbooks. The role of the teachers is to implement what the MOET directs; therefore, every teacher must follow the same curriculum prescribed by MOET, and high school students in the whole country have to study the prescribed lesson on a daily basis. Teachers could adapt the textbook by adding additional

activities, but they are not allowed to change of content of the lesson. In terms of assessment, the nationwide English examination is compulsory for all high school students to be eligible for high school graduation and for some students to be admitted to universities. However, the national exam only tests students in terms of language components such as pronunciation, reading comprehension, and vocabulary (Le, 2020). The government is going to approve different English textbooks for high school students in 2022.

From 2000 to 2020, Vietnam reformed its English program with a key focus on communicative language skills (Le & Barnard, 2009). In 2008, MOET launched a series of mandated textbooks to replace the previous ones with the aim of developing communicative language skills for students. MOET reformed the English program in 2021 for primary school and secondary schools. In 2022, the revised English curriculum reforms in Vietnam had three big changes: instructional practice, the introduction of a new textbook series, and teacher professional development (Tran, 2018). From 2022 different textbooks were used at high schools in Vietnam.

In a system where teachers have limited autonomy to choose materials, implement their teaching methods, or tweak their assessment, how they deal with the mandated curricula with a compulsory textbook and national high-stakes exam has not been documented. This study examined how teachers perceived both 2008 and 2022 curricula with the two different textbooks and syllabi, conducted their English teaching and assessment, and supported students' learning outcomes.

## **2. Teaching and learning English at high schools in Vietnam**

### ***2.1. English program in Vietnam***

The secondary school system in Vietnam has three different levels: Primary schools (Grades 1 - 5), secondary schools (Grades 6 - 9), and high schools (Grades 10 - 12). Each academic year has 35 weeks, which is divided into two semesters. After grade 12, all high school students have to take the high-stakes national exam to get to the university or to get a certificate of secondary school completion to study at vocational schools. This exam is considered a passport to get into universities (Nguyen, 2011); therefore, students try to get high scores in this exam. Students have to study the total of 815 periods (45 minutes for each period) and secondary school students have to study English for 10 years. Students have two English periods at elementary schools, three periods for Grades 6 - 8, two periods for Grade 9, and three periods for Grades 10 - 12.

At present, there are two main curricula being taught in Vietnam: the 2008 and 2022 curricula, each with its own textbook series. While 2008 curricula have been used for more than 10 years and the 2022 curricula have been introduced. Students have to study English for 07 years in the 2008 curriculum compared to 10 years in the 2022 curriculum. In both series of the textbook, Hoang (2016, 2018), the chief editor of all textbook series, adopted communicative language teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981; Swain, 1985) as the main principle when writing the textbooks. The 2022 textbooks have been used at a large scale at many schools in Vietnam since 2016, but so far, few studies (Hoang, 2018) have been conducted about the suitability of the curricula realized in the series of textbooks. In addition to these two programs, an English-enhanced program is used for students who want to pursue English as a major subject in high school in Vietnam. These students have more English periods than normal students. This current study only focuses on teaching and learning English at high schools in Vietnam.

## **2.2. Teaching and learning English in Vietnam**

When the 2008 textbooks were launched, many studies (Le, 2011, 2012; Le & Barnard, 2009; Nguyen, Le, & Barnard, 2015) had been conducted about the application of its innovative curricula which emphasized communicative skills. Nevertheless, findings from these studies showed that teachers focused on forms when they explicitly presented grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension without letting students have free language production. Teachers believed that good knowledge of grammar would foster language accuracy and confidence in speaking and writing; therefore, high school teachers tried to focus on grammar. They also replaced some language skill periods for grammatical lessons (Le, 2011; Nguyen, 2014). The findings from these studies showed a conflict between the government-macro strategies that aimed to enable students to communicate effectively in the future while teachers' real practices in the classroom placed an overly emphasis on explicitly presenting language components. This conflict has led to the English language education reform in 2022; however, a few studies have been conducted about the 2022 curricula.

## **2.3. Assessment in Vietnam**

English language assessment at K-12 schools is highly controlled by MOET and heavily focuses on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary rather than language skills. High school students are required take monthly mini tests, termly and yearly tests. However, as teachers are instructed by the guidelines, these tests focus on grammar, reading, and a little bit of listening but rarely assess students' speaking skills. By the end of Grade 12, most of students must take the national examination except those who obtain the required scores for international English exams such as IELTS or TOEFL. This national examination is only organized once a year, and the English test lasts from 60 to 90 minutes in length depending on each year. The national English examination also only assesses grammar, vocabulary and word stress or pronunciation. In another way, it only tests explicit knowledge or descriptive grammar without assessing whether students could use these grammatical items in their speaking, writing, or listening. Vietnamese government launched the National Foreign Language Project, namely Project 2020 (The Prime Minister, 2008), and extended this project to 2025 in which framework for assessment was adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and developed to evaluate Vietnamese students and teachers' English Language Proficiency (ELP). Although some higher education institutions have used Vietnamese Standard Tests of English Proficiency (VSTEP) (Hoang, 2016) to assess students' ELP (Ngo, 2019), secondary schools have not referred to these criteria for school students' ELP assessment.

## **2.4. Learning outcomes**

The Project 2020 (The Prime Minister, 2008) structured a framework for Vietnamese students' and teachers' ELP assessment. The Vietnamese framework for ELP assessment indicated that ELP required for primary students is at A1 level (CEFR), for lower secondary students at A2, and for upper secondary, non-English major college and university at B1, respectively. Although the CEFR was adopted for writing the series of English textbooks (Hoang, 2016), Le (2013) described that students were incapable of using English for communicative purposes after their nine-year English learning process.

Previous studies about English language education reforms in Vietnam.

There were mixed results about teachers' perceptions of English language educational reforms. Most of the teachers had negative attitudes towards the innovation because they supposed there were a lot of challenges such as having a high level of difficulties, mixed level students, different motivation, heavy workload, washback of the exam, unconfident teachers, and

limited facilities (Vu, Winsler, & Walsh, 2020). Similarly, that students' low English proficiency, limited self-directed learning, traditional teaching approach, insufficient language and teaching skills, lack of training, large class sizes, limited teaching time and inadequate teaching facilities are the difficulties to implement new curricula (Nguyen et al., 2023). Teachers also reported that there was a mismatch between textbooks and the testing system. Although the textbook is reported to adopt the communicative system, teachers adopted teaching systems that adopt grammatical teaching approaches (Tran, 2018). As a result, teachers focused explicitly on linguistic items that are assessed in the exams although they are contradictory to their beliefs and teaching principles (Ha, Tran, & Tran, 2021). However, high school teachers in the Mekong Delta were reported to adopt the innovative methods recommended by the reforms (Le & Le, 2022) depending on teachers' educational background.

In summary, there is a gap between the government macro-strategies and teachers' real classroom practices. While the macro-strategies are to improve students' communicative skills, teachers try to teach explicit grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary without paying much attention to language skills. Also, there is a conflict between the curricula and the assessment. While the aim of the curricula is to improve language in the former, the assessment focuses on the latter. As a result, students' ELP learning outcomes were lower than expected according to VSTEP. In response to current challenges, MOET has trialed the 2022 textbooks with the aim to reform teaching methods adopting CLT. Little research has been conducted on teachers' perceptions of their English program in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment when there are discrepancies between curriculum's general objectives and nationwide summative assessment. This study is aimed at investigating teachers' perceptions of the 2022 curriculum with the 2022 textbook, their teaching practices and assessments, and students' learning outcomes. From now on, the terms 2008 and 2022 textbooks refer to the textbook series. The study seeks the answers to the following research questions.

*How do teachers perceive the 2008 and 2022 curricula?*

*How do teachers practice their teaching and conduct assessments in both curricula?*

*How do teachers perceive students' learning outcomes under the centrally controlled system by MOET?*

### **3. Methodology**

The study employed quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014) using an online survey with both close- and open-ended questions. The survey was adapted from (Nguyen, 2021) including five main parts. The survey questions asked for high school teachers' demographic information, their perspectives on Vietnamese-mandated English curricula, their teaching practices and assessment, and students' learning outcomes. There are also some open-ended questions to further ask their perspectives. All the survey questions were written in Vietnamese to make sure that Vietnamese teachers were able to fully understand and feel comfortable voicing their opinions. Four researchers took turn to vet the survey which had been revised four times before it was sent to the participants.

The online survey could be conducted easily and can reach a wide population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013); however, the participants can drop out in the middle of the survey. In order to motivate high school teachers to complete the survey, a set of six professional development workshops was established. Teachers who completed the survey were invited to join 03 out of these 06 workshops. All the researchers posted the survey on their public Facebook pages and some other Facebook groups of Vietnamese teachers calling for

participants. One of the researchers, who is a teacher trainer in Vietnam and used to train a group of high school teachers for the national project, emailed that group of teachers to invite them to participate in the research project. The survey was delivered in 10 days and received 421 responses. After checking the survey, responses with three-fifths of complete answers were categorized as valid ones. Responses that completed a small part of the survey or selected the same option for the whole survey were categorized 'invalid'; therefore, these responses were not counted. Answers to open-ended questions were analyzed and coded to themes. There were four main themes: curricula, teachers' teaching methods, assessment, and students' learning outcomes. Finally, 163 responses from the survey were considered as both valid and completed while the other answers were not taken into account.

#### **4. Results**

Participant's information about gender, teaching experiences, and teaching places in the survey is diverse. Most of them (90%) are female, 9% male, and 1% undisclosed. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) taught in small cities and towns, while less than a quarter (24%) were in big cities (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Can Tho, and Hai Phong). Just over a quarter of teachers taught in the mountainous areas or islands. Teachers' English language proficiency was also very diverse from B1 to C2 levels. However, almost two-thirds of the respondents (64%) were at the C1 level, which is compulsory for English teachers at high schools, and around a quarter (23%) were at the B2 level. Both B1 and C2 shared about 03% of the total. Approximately 06% of the teachers surveyed were not sure about their English language proficiency. In terms of teaching experiences, more than a quarter (28%) of the teachers had about 11 to 15 years of teaching experience while three groups from 01 to 05 years, 06 to 10 years, and 16 to 20 years of teaching experience shared about a fifth each, 21%, 20%, and 18%, respectively. The other group with more than 20 years of experience accounted for approximately 14%. About the grade that teachers taught, nearly an equal number (around 33%) of teachers taught one of three grades, but among these teachers, some of them taught two or three grades at the same time. Teachers who teach grade 12 had to train students for the national exam, which is very important to students.

As described in the introduction, high school teachers taught three curricula: 2022 curricula with one of the 2022 textbook series, 2008 enhanced English curricula in which English subjects got more time, and 2008 curricula with the 2008 textbook series. Just more than half of the teachers taught the 2022 trial curricula, and nearly half of the teachers taught 2008 textbooks. Only 3% of the total taught English-enhanced programs, which was at a low rate. The study focuses on comparing the differences among teachers teaching 2022 and 2008 curricula with respective textbooks.

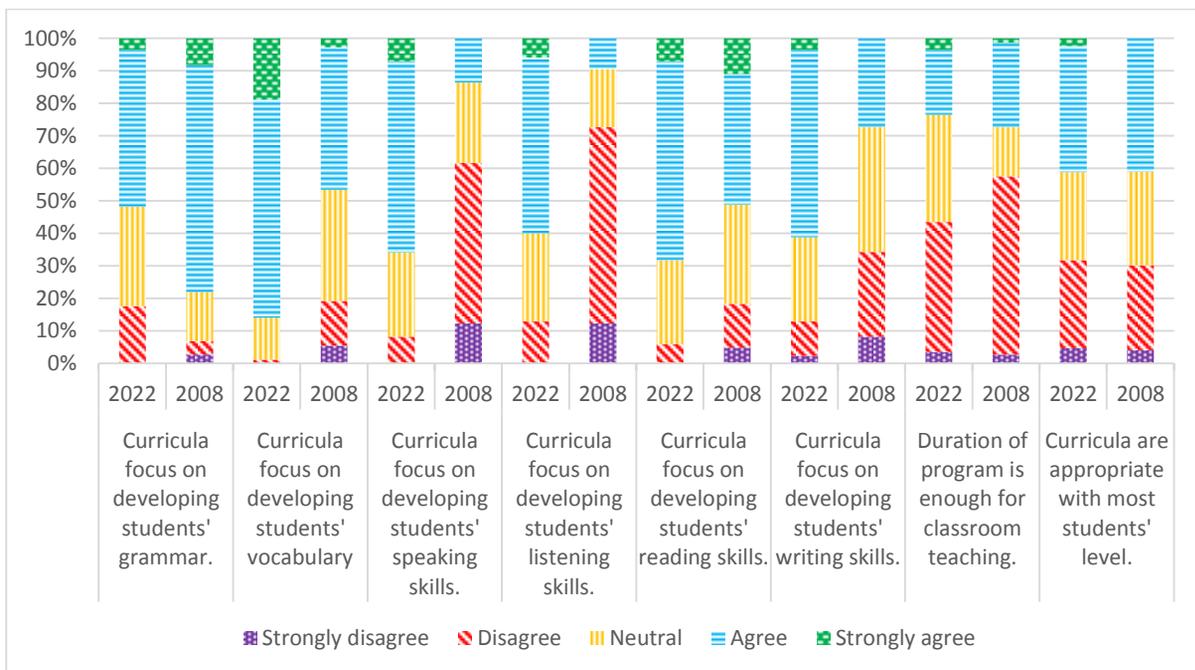
As described earlier, the survey examines teachers' perceptions of four analytical categories. Our major findings included teacher's evaluation of curricula, their teaching practices and assessment, and their perceived learning outcomes. As the curricula were realized in the textbooks published by Education Publisher, which were compulsory teaching materials, the terms 'textbooks' and 'curricula' were used interchangeably, but both of them mean the curricula written by MOET. There are two textbook series: 2008 textbooks and 2022 textbooks. In this section, we present the results regarding the 2022 and 2008 curricula and textbooks, respectively.

##### **4.1. Teachers' evaluation of the curricula**

In terms of curricula, teachers' shared perceptions of the suitability of the 2008 and 2022 textbooks. Results from Figure 1 showed that 2022 and 2008 curricula teachers expressed mixed

perspectives. More than 40% of teachers agreed that the 2008 and 2022 textbooks were appropriate for students’ level in comparison to more than 30% who did not. The majority of 2008-curricula teachers (more than 55%) reported that they had limited time to teach the textbooks in class while about 45% of the 2022-curricula teachers expressed similar opinions. It is notable that more 2022 curricula teachers agreed that there was not enough time to teach than teachers who disagreed.

There was a difference in curricula evaluation among 2022 and 2008-curricula teachers. Figure 1 shows that while most of the 2022 curricula teachers reported that their curricula were able to improve student’s four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; the majority of the 2008 curricula teachers tended to disagree that their textbooks enabled students to improve three out of four these skills: listening, speaking, and writing. However, most of these two curricula’s teachers were in agreement that the textbooks used in both curricula could develop students’ reading skills, grammar, and vocabulary. In general, 2022 textbooks received higher evaluation than 2008 ones.



**Figure 1.** Teachers’ evaluation of English curricula

Responses from the open-ended survey questions provided a better understanding about teachers’ evaluation about their programs. Some 2022-curricula teachers commented that one of the strengths of the 2022 textbooks was to employ the CLT as a teaching framework, so they can develop four language skills. They further noted that their program was designed to build communicative skills which was very good. Lessons for four language skills were equally arranged for knowledge and skills, not concentrating too much on language knowledge, but focussing on skills. All activities encouraged students to interact well and effective. One of the examples in the opened ended questions for the 2022 textbooks:

*The [2022] program was designed to build communicative skills which was very good. Lessons for four language skills were equally arranged for knowledge and skills, not concentrating too much on language knowledge, but focussing on skills. All activities encouraged students to interact well (2022-R076).*

As teachers teaching 2022 curricula commented that four language skills were incorporated into the curricula and realized in the textbooks, textbook contents are in line with the initial purposes of adopting CLT as a framework to enable students to communicate. Although the 2022 textbooks could develop four language skills, they were “*only appropriate for good students*” (2022-R238) because many new words within a lesson and students’ capabilities were not at the right levels for the 2022 textbooks.

*Each lesson has rather many new words. The lesson is not very appropriate for students in the rural areas. Some students in the city also could not keep up with the program* (2022-R076).

Many 2022 curricula teachers explained that the amount of knowledge was overloaded for students within the allotted timeframe. Teachers could not present all the knowledge.

*The amount of knowledge that students had to master was too much, leading to the overwhelmed feeling* (2022-R033).

Likewise, the 2008-curricula teachers evaluated that their curricula were outdated. They had insufficient time to impart all the knowledge to students. One of the 2008 curricula teachers acknowledged:

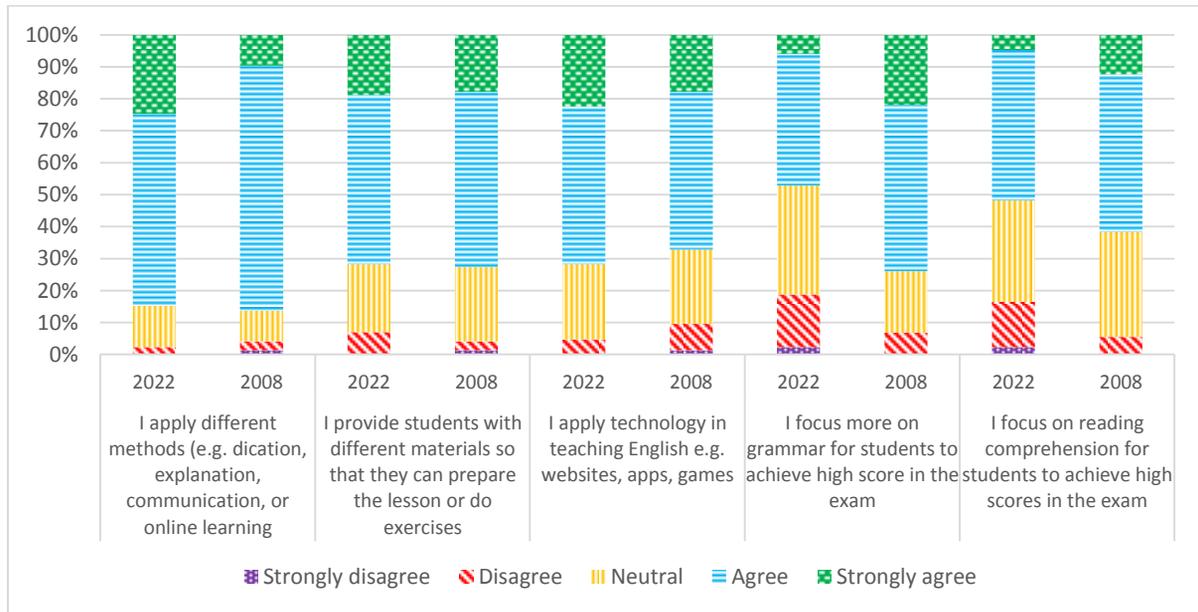
*I found the 2008 curricula not suitable for most of the students, and there was not enough time in each period to teach skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing as instructed in the textbook by MOET, and the assessment only examined grammar, reading comprehension and pronunciation* (2008-R224).

Some 2008 curricula teachers further commented why the 2008 curricula were not interesting and did not develop language skills. Some open-ended survey respondents wrote that “The [old] curricula focused on grammar and vocabulary, but did not concentrate on developing skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing” (2008-R035).

In summary, most of the 2022 curricula teachers supposed that the 2022 textbooks were interesting because students felt familiar with a variety of topics in these textbooks. The 2022 textbooks were appropriate for high-level students in the big cities but not for the low-level or those from rural and mountainous areas. Although most 2022 curricula teachers agreed that the 2022 program could develop students’ language skills, class time was constrained. On the other hand, the 2008 textbooks were outdated and were too overloaded for students. These textbooks also did not develop language skills except reading, grammar and vocabulary. 2008-curricula teachers had to face issues with regard to time constraints and inappropriate-level students in class; however, they had to use these 2008-mandated textbooks for at least 02 more years.

#### **4.2. Teachers’ teaching methods**

Figure 2 shows that most of the teachers (70%) teaching both 2008 and 2022 curricula applied different teaching methods such as CLT, grammar translation, technologies, and online teaching. However, 55% of the 2008 curricula teachers tried to spend more time teaching grammar and reading comprehension for the examinations. The number of 2022 curricula teachers applying the same strategies is about 45% for grammar and 55% for reading comprehension. In most of the 2008 and 2022 curricula, teachers taught for examination protocols rather than for students’ learning. It can be concluded that more teachers within these two curricula tended to teach for testing and examinations.



**Figure 2.** Teachers' teaching methods

The open-ended survey questions highlighted that some of the 2022 curricula teachers tried to use communicative language teaching as MOET's guidelines. One teacher wrote, "To start up, I designed and instructed students based on their language ability. I often divided them into groups according to their English level and asked them to work in groups" (2022-R131). Teachers were asked to conduct all the activities in the textbooks without creating anything new, although they knew that their students felt bored with the lesson. One of the teachers commented that.

*First, I often started by letting students play games. If the lesson is too long, I will ask some questions. I carried out all the activities according to the textbook but students did not find them interesting, but they wanted me to give them practice for the school examination (2022-R105).*

The example showed that students studying both the 2022 and 2008 curricula were demotivated when they had to study English communicatively. What students really wanted to study was to practice or cram for the national examination to achieve high scores. As a result, teachers were in a dilemma in deciding the teaching methods because they were aware that if they taught English communicatively, students would be demotivated. Teachers were not sure whether they should teach language skills or linguistic knowledge so that students could get high scores for national examinations. These teachers thought that "The current assessment heavily focused on grammar, not on communicative skills. The content of the tests and textbook were not similar, which causes some difficulties for teachers and students in the learning process" (2008-R054, 2022-R105, 2022-R007, 2008-R047).

Some of the 2008 curricula teachers chose to teach for testing rather than for students learning. They did not follow the curricula suggested by MOET, but transformed lesson plans to examination-based teaching because they wanted students to get scores for graduation. They tried to focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension and ignored other skills. One teacher wrote,

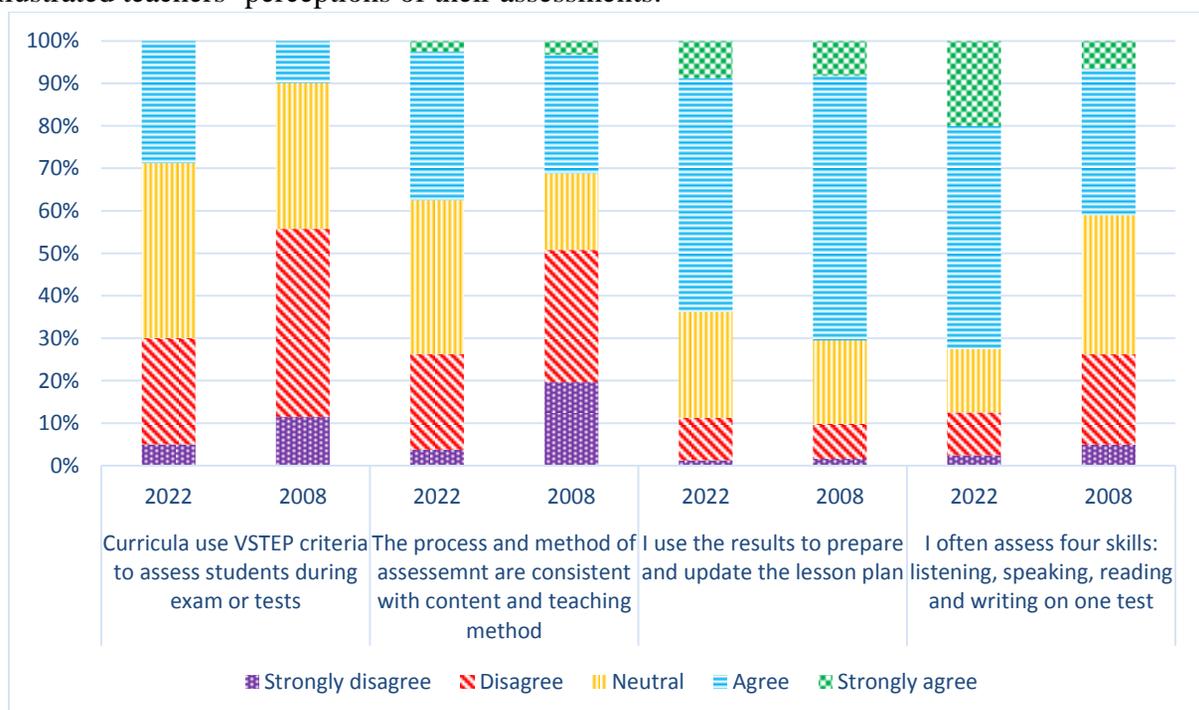
*Because students were in Grade 12, we aimed to teach for testing. Developed vocabulary for students by letting students do vocabulary exercises according to the topic, the listening period was used to practice pronunciation according to the test format of the national examination; the speaking period was used to do exercises of communicative skills by choosing*

the right answer according to the national exam; the reading period was used to practice two types of exercises in the national examination; writing period was used to practice three types of exercises in the national exam: finding mistakes, transforming sentences and combining sentences. The language focus period was used to review common grammatical topics that the national test often examines and let students do some mini-tests in the review periods. Only 25% of the students found it interesting and we aimed that students would not fail (2008-R146).

In short, teachers in both new and old programs tried to diversify their teaching methods, using different techniques such as employing technologies or teaching online. However, they had to face a dilemma to choose between teaching for learning and testing. If they spent much time practicing students' skills so that they communicate well in the future, as the textbook suggested, they would not have sufficient time to prepare their students for the national examination. It means that their students would not go to the universities as they wished. Most of the teachers decided to prioritize their time for teaching reading, grammar, and vocabulary and prepare their students for high-stakes examinations instead of spending time on training students' communicative skills. As teachers reported that assessment affected their teaching methods, the following section will investigate teachers' assessment practices.

### 4.3. Teachers' assessment at high schools

Responses from the close-ended survey questions indicated that there were differences in terms of assessment among teachers teaching old and new textbooks. While just more than 40% of old-textbook teachers assessed students' four skills, more than 70% of new-textbook teachers did. More than 70% of the teachers in both programs used the results to prepare the lesson plans. In addition, the majority of the old-textbook teachers (more than 50%) disagreed that there was an alignment between their assessment and teaching methods and the textbook content, whereas only 25% of new-textbook teachers had the same opinions. Another difference is that most teachers (56%) teaching the 2008 textbooks supposed that the assessment did not use the VSTEP criteria for testing in contrast to 30% of the teachers teaching the 2022 textbooks. Figure 3 illustrated teachers' perceptions of their assessments.



**Figure 3.** Teacher's perceptions of their assessments

One of the teachers teaching the 2022 textbooks explained the conflict between the textbook content and the assessment. While the assessment focuses on language knowledge such as grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary, the content of the textbook emphasizes language skills. Teachers further commented that *“The method of assessment did not correlate with the content of the program. The examination tested on linguistic knowledge and did not test the ability to use language such as speaking and writing”* (2022-R045, 2022-R007, 2022-R059, 2022-R074, 2022-R081, 2022-R085, 2022-R101). Teachers teaching 2008 textbooks questioned the teaching of language skills because they thought it was not useful for students to study four language skills by asking the questions *“What did teachers present teaching speaking, listening, writing for?”* (2008-R040).

Teachers of both 2022 and 2008 curricula suggested that assessment should include four language skills especially speaking and listening to motivate both teachers and students.

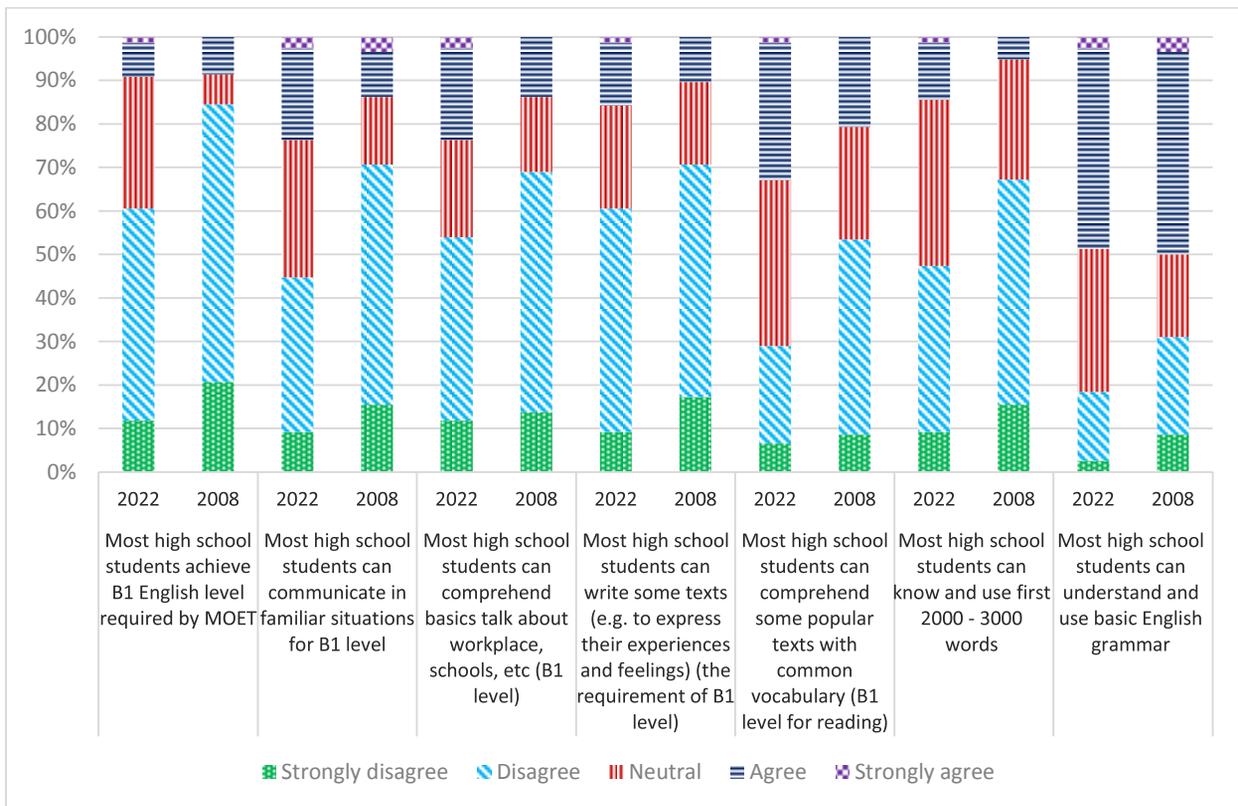
*Assessment should focus on communicative competence, not just examining grammar and vocabulary. The content of the assessment should be consistent with the content of the textbooks.* (2022-R054, 2008-R047, 2022-R074, 2008-R027, 2022-R016).

In summary, the 2022 and 2008 curricula teachers teaching reported that there was a discrepancy between assessment and the textbook content. While the 2022 textbooks place an emphasis on language skills, the assessment examined grammar, vocabulary and reading. The teachers found difficult to balance their teaching and students' learning. As a result, the majority of the teachers teaching the 2008 textbooks did not assess language skills, but focused on testing the reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary. Also, a significant number of 2022 curricula teachers also did not assess language skills. These numbers showed that there was a conflict between MOET's innovation efforts with key focus on communicative skills and teachers' real assessment practices emphasizing language knowledge.

As we described earlier, there was a conflict of the textbook content and the language assessment, what about the learning outcome when teachers tried to teach and assess language knowledge and ignore language skills, the following study will examine the teachers' perceptions of students' learning outcomes.

#### **4.4. Students' learning outcomes**

Most of the teachers (more than 60%) teaching both 2022 and 2008 textbooks noted that students did not meet the requirements of the B1 level for speaking, listening, writing and vocabulary but for grammar. About 50% of the 2022 and 2008 curricula teachers agreed that students achieved the grammar knowledge which is equivalent to B1 level. The majority of 2008 curricula teachers supposed that students did not meet the requirements of the B1 level for reading skill while less than 30% of the 2022 curricula teachers had the same evaluation. Figure 4 presents teachers' perceptions of their students' learning outcomes.



**Figure 4.** Teachers’ perceptions of students’ learning outcomes

Teachers teaching both 2022 and 2008 textbooks commented in the open-ended survey questions that students had good language knowledge especially grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. But they could not use language skills for their communicative purposes. One teacher wrote that, “Students had good vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension but not very good at listening and communicative skills” (2022-R076). Another teacher commented that students’ listening and speaking skills were very low, which disabled them from communicating in English, stating, “90% of the students were not able to communicate in English. Both listening and speaking were very low” (2022-R126). One of the teachers teaching the 2008 textbooks explained why students’ learning outcomes were quite low in terms of speaking and listening skills, and supposed that students’ English level was about A2, noting.

*As I said earlier both teacher and students were affected by the washback effects of the exam; therefore, most of the time [teachers and students] focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension with multiple choice questions. Therefore, when students graduate, if they did not participate in the course outside schools to develop four language skills, students would not able to use the language at B1 level. Their English levels were about A2 (2008-R236).*

If students were able to speak and write in English, they seemed to study elsewhere outside classroom. The teachers also thought that students’s ELP were one level lower than supposed.

Most of the teachers teaching both 2022 and 2008 textbooks thought that their students did not achieve ELP requirements for the B1 level set by MOET. Their actual level was much lower than B1. Especially, they were not very good at listening and speaking because teachers did not focus on these two skills. However, these teachers further reflected that their students could get enough grammatical knowledge for B1 level.

Our analysis suggested that knowledge of each lesson was rather heavy, and allotted time for each lesson was insufficient for teachers to present each lesson with mixed-level students. The teachers teaching both 2022 and 2008 textbooks were not able to cover all the suggested lessons during class time. Both 2008 and 2022 curricula were too difficult for low-level students or those from the rural and mountainous areas. In terms of teaching methods, teachers had to face the dilemma between teaching for testing and student's learning. Although some teachers teaching the 2022 textbooks tried to teach communicatively, some of them decided to teach for testing by replacing language skills periods with language knowledge. Regarding assessment, there was a mismatch between content of testing and that of the textbooks, and some teachers had to choose to test the reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar rather than language skills. As a result, the majority of students would not be expected to achieve English language proficiency requirements for B1 level set by MOET in terms of speaking, listening, and writing.

## 5. Discussion

Most teachers perceived those lessons in 2022 textbooks were unrealistic for them to achieve within the prescribed timeframe. Although they tried their best to diversify their pedagogical approaches, they still focused on teaching for testing. The teachers reported the predicament of some low-level students from the city or rural areas who were not able to follow the 2022 textbooks because they were overwhelmed by the textbook content, resonating with the voices of 2008 textbook teachers. This result is consistent to Nguyen (2007) research. She found that the 2008 textbooks were a real challenge for students in the mountainous or remote areas when she conducted the evaluation of the 2008 textbooks. At that time, the 2008 textbooks were launched to innovate the English education program in high schools and aimed to enable students to communicate effectively. The current study also showed that the 2008 textbooks were too heavy for students, and these textbooks focused too much on language knowledge. It is similar to Vu et al.'s (2020) findings that teachers supposed that the curricula were too overloaded for students. However, this is also a slight difference from what Nguyen (2007) reported in her evaluation of the trial of 2008 textbooks before its official launch nationwide. Nguyen (2007) concluded that the textbooks had some balances between communicative skills and language components, but some communicative activities were not natural. Perhaps teachers teaching 2008 textbooks may focus on the language knowledge more than the skills; therefore, they perceived that the textbooks had too much language content.

*The 2022 textbook looks like a second edition of 2008, and will not be the panacea for all current problems*

The 2022 textbook was designed to innovate the curricula, which is similar to the 2008 textbook series when they were first launched. Hoang (2016), the editor-in-chief of one of the 2022 textbook series, described that the 2022 textbooks would be an agent of change for the 2022 curricula. It would have a strong impact on teachers' teaching methodology, which leads to effective and quality English teaching and learning in Vietnam. Teachers voiced that both 2008 and 2022 textbooks were too long for them to present in class although the 2022 textbooks have been trialled and revised for four years and have not officially launched yet when this study was written. Students in the rural areas could not keep up with the content of both textbooks. The results are consistent to what Hoang (2018) found that students from the rural or mountainous areas were overwhelmed by the 2022 textbooks. He explained that because teachers misunderstood that the 2022 textbook content was compulsory to teach all; therefore, they presented all the textbook content. Although the 2022 textbooks were in the trial phases, these textbooks have showed some negative aspects. There is no warranty that when they are launched

nationally, they will be successful in innovating the curricula. The 2022 textbooks adopted CLT as the principal teaching method (Hoang, 2016); however, findings from this current study indicated that 2022 Hoang's textbooks have not shown the reforming purposes of using CLT in teaching and learning so that students could communicate well when they graduate. Teachers teaching the 2022 textbooks had to face a difficult task in choosing to present grammatical items or helping students to improve language skills. It means that they have to choose between teaching for learning and teaching for testing.

#### *Teaching and learning efforts revolved around national testing*

Although teachers reported that they tried their best to apply CLT in their teaching, some of them decided to teach for testing instead of students' learning because of the pressure from their management. Ha et al. (2021) also found that teachers were strongly influenced by the high-stakes exams that they focused explicitly on linguistic items that are assessed in the exams. The result is similar to what was described by Le (2020) who said that language component was emphasized at the expense of language skills. The finding from the current study is similar to findings from Endriyati and Anggraeni (2019) who studied the washback effects of the national exams in Indonesia that English language teachers placed their teaching methods to use grammar translation to present grammar and vocabulary to teach students. They also changed teaching resources so that they could have more exercises for students to practice their tests. However, the results are different from Nguyen's (2013) findings that teachers believed that mastering grammar would result in language skills. The results from the current study showed that teachers were aware that they needed to focus on language skills to develop communicative competence for students, but the national examination is the main force to hold them back implementing the communicative teaching method. They face a dilemma that if they tried to present language skills, they would not have sufficient time to help students study well for their examination.

There was a discrepancy between the assessment and the content of the textbooks. There was also a conflict between the macro-strategies of fostering communicative language skills and communicative language teaching with the national examination which focus on language knowledge. As a result, most teachers did not assess language skills but assessed language knowledge. In addition, students' instrumental motivation to practise their speaking and listening is questionable because they did perceive the application of communication (Le, 2015); therefore, even teachers tried their best to teach communicatively, students were not motivated to study. However, as Hoang (2018) suggested that the method of assessment should adopt the CLT rather than language knowledge. The national exam had strong washback effects not only on teachers' teaching methods but also on their daily assessments. Therefore, there is a need to change the assessment system so that CLT is fully assessed, but not linguistic knowledge as it is right now so that the assessment could motivate both teachers and students to learn and teach communicatively.

#### *Reforms: Old wine in new bottles*

The 2022 high school curricula aim to develop language skills for students to reach the B1 level after they graduate. The 2022 curricula realized in the 2022 textbooks when Hoang's textbooks adopted the CEFR framework as the guideline for writing the content of the textbook Hoang (2018). Most of the teachers surveyed reported that students were lower than the required level B1 in terms of language skills. Students only met the requirements of the B1 level regarding grammar. The result is consistent with Le (2013) findings that high school students were at A2 level while their expected level should be B1. When the 2022 textbooks have been trialled, Hoang (2018) pointed out some issues relating to the reform such as the national

examination, teachers' low English language proficiency, overcrowded classroom. He pointed out that in order for the reform to be successful, these problems should be solved. However, when the textbooks are officially launched nationwide in 2022 there will be no guarantee that the number of the students in the classroom will be 35 as suggested because some classes had nearly sixty students (Nguyen, 2018). In addition, it is not sure that teachers will meet their language proficiency when Nguyen (2017) described more than 80% of the teachers did not meet their language requirement. Even in this current study, more than 26% of the surveyed teachers reported that their language proficiency was one level lower than the required standard. The current national examination still tests reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and there is no plan to change in the future. As a result, it can be foreseen the failure of the English reforms with the 2022 textbook under investigation. Although the 2022 curricula with 2022 textbooks aims to promote communicative language skills, it can be predicted that the 2022 curricula is not going to innovate or reform English teaching and learning in Vietnam as expected because the teachers still prioritize their teaching for the national examination as described in 3.2. To succeed, the reforms should be consistent among the curricula, teaching method, assessment so that outcome could be maximized.

## **6. Conclusion and pedagogical implications**

Although the 2022 textbooks aim to innovate the English teaching and learning in Vietnam, they are too long for teachers to teach. At the same time, the national examination only tested grammar, reading and vocabulary, teachers had to face a real dilemma in choosing the right method to balance between the textbooks and the national examination. If they choose to teach students skills to communicate in the future, they do not have enough time to prepare their students for the examination. While some teachers try to diversify the teaching method to conclude both linguistic knowledge and skills, others only teach grammar so that students could pass the national examination. In addition, the 2022 textbooks were too overloaded for low-level and mountainous students when their English language proficiency was not high enough to follow the textbook. Thirdly, because of the national exam, teachers tried to present and to test linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary at the expense of language skills. As a result, students' learning outcomes were much lower than what was expected by MOET.

There are a number of pedagogical implications from the findings. First, to reform the real teaching and learning in Vietnam, urgent changes should be made in the national examination to employ communicative skills in assessing students' English language proficiency. MOET could empower provincial departments of education and training to conduct their own assessment according to CEFR framework so that CLT assessment could be fully conducted instead of a current national examination. The assessment will motivate teachers and students to learn and teach in a more communicative environment rather than only replacing the 2008 textbooks by 2022 ones. The reforming curricula should be consistent with the teaching method, assessment so that the learning outcomes could be maximised.

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