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Implementing the CEFR at a Vietnamese university—General English language teachers' perceptions

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This paper reports preliminary findings regarding English language teachers' perceptions of the top-down implementation of the CEFR for non-English major students at a university in Vietnam. The study follows a mixed-method sequential design with the data being collected by means of questionnaire and interview. The findings have shown that General English (GE) language teachers have a sound understanding of the CEFR's values, think positively about its readiness and have relatively good awareness around the necessity for its implementation. Yet they express major concerns about the work and tasks involved in the CEFR implementation process. The most frequently cited reasons are associated with time constraints, limited access to relevant teaching materials and the tremendous gap between students' admission levels of proficiency and the expected CEFR-based learning outcomes. Relevant suggestions are drawn out with the hope of improving the process of implementing the CEFR in a specific context and facilitating fruitful educational changes to take place.

1 Introduction

Soon after its publication in 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference (henceforth the CEFR) gained attention and respect, not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world (Alderson 2002, Byrnes 2007, Hulstijn 2007, Tono and Negishi 2012). The enthusiasm for the document has been recognized to extend far beyond Europe to Latin America, the Middle East, Australia and parts of Asia (Byram and Parmenter 2012). Outside the European context, as a "supranational language education policy" (Little 2007: 645), the CEFR has been observed to have major influences in language policy planning (Bonnet 2007, Byrnes 2007, Little 2007, Nguyen and Hamid 2015, Pham 2012, Pham 2017) especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. A number of Asian countries have experienced the implementation of the CEFR in national contexts as an attempt to reform the system of language teaching in the country. Vietnam is not an exception.

In 2008, the Vietnamese Government launched a national project named "*Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national educational system for the 2008-2020 period*", often referred to as Vietnam's National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (henceforth 2020 Project) as a national strategy so as to renovate the foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system during the period 2008-2020 (MOET 2008), now extended to 2025 (Vietnamese government 2017). The most significant part of the 2020 Project is the adoption of the CEFR, a global framework, into the local Vietnamese context of language teaching and learning as a "quick-fix" (Steiner-Khamsi 2004) solution to restructure the national foreign language education system. On the basis of the CEFR, a Vietnamese version of CEFR was developed, approved and legitimated by Vietnamese authorities (MOET 2014). This CEFR-aligned framework is actually the translation of the CEFR into Vietnamese with very few modifications (Pham 2017, Pham 2018). The CEFR-based levels of proficiency were used to set standards for learning outcomes at different levels of education, from primary through secondary and high schools to universities.

Students leaving primary schools at grade 5 are expected to achieve the CEFR-A1 level, lower secondary and high schools the CEFR-A2 and B1 respectively. Students majoring in English must achieve level C1 to be entitled to be granted university graduation degree while non-English majors must obtain B1 level.

The CEFR global levels were also utilized to set standards for teacher professionalism. Teachers teaching English at primary and lower secondary schools are asked to achieve B2. Those teaching English at high school or higher should obtain C1 and above. This adoption of the CEFR as the standard for both student outcomes and for professional assessment, underpinned by the 2020 Project in Vietnam, had been hoped to bring about positive, radical changes as is clearly stated in Decision 1400 of the government.

However, there have been warnings that the success of this ambitious language policy could be threatened by both its unfamiliar and top-down nature.

Firstly, since adapted from the CEFR, whose original purpose is not directed to diverse language contexts around the world but revolves around Europe, this alien framework may give rise to paradoxes if it is not carefully contextualized (Pham 2017). With remarkable differences in terms of social needs, language learning and teaching conditions, qualifications of language teachers and proficiency levels of learners as well as expectations and purposes, the appropriateness of the CEFR-aligned framework in Vietnam may be questioned. The implementation of the CEFR in Vietnam could, thus, be very socio-political in nature if "using the European model regardless of how inappropriate such a model might have been" (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997: 153).

Secondly, the Vietnamese CEFR-aligned framework has been forwarded to lower levels for implementation without explanatory reasons being given for its adoption (Pham 2017) nor with any consultation with the ultimate language learners and users. There is also a lack of previous research and pilot use of this framework in Vietnam (Pham 2012, Pham 2018). Even now, there is no official document or research evidence describing the involvement of teachers and students in the process of making decisions around applying the CEFR in Vietnam. When teachers' perceptions or their students' need and wants are not taken account, it is synonymous that teachers' ownership of innovation was denied and the possibility of teacher feedback was minimal (Kennedy 2013). As such, the adoption of the CEFR can be considered to follow the 'top-down' approach, clearly reflected in the literature on language planning. Accordingly, practitioners, especially teachers and learners at the lowest levels have had no say in this policy-making. Teachers are envisioned only as implementers of the policy and not as players of key roles in the centralized language planning processes (Poon 2000, Waters 2009). Therefore, the implementation of the CEFR in Vietnam is likely to create some mismatches between the expectations of adopters, those who sanction (government officials) the innovation and those who implement (teachers) it. The need for research, on the topic of the national adoption of CEFR language policy and issues of its implementation, has emerged.

In addition, research has shown that problems and failures in the implementation phase may emerge from teachers themselves due to their attitudes and behaviour. Although teachers' perceptions and attitudes are not always reflected in what actually teachers do in the classroom, they do influence practices (Borg 2009) and teachers' practices are considered as the visible part of the teaching iceberg (Waters 2009). In understanding teachers' perceptions, the submerged part of the iceberg can be of great importance in explaining what teachers do in the classroom. As for the implementation process, teachers, as implementers, play a significant role in bonding learners, materials, teaching practice and assessment altogether. However, studies have demonstrated that teachers do not always do as directed nor did they always act to maximize policy objectives (Cohen and Ball 1990, McLaughlin 1987). Additionally, they have been diagnosed as "resistant to change" (Wang 2008) or unwilling to implement a teaching innovation despite expressing positive attitudes towards it (Kennedy 1999, Keranen 2008, cited in Waters 2009). Resistance, subversion and/or indifference are among the teachers' attitudes towards change and innovations.

Surrounding the implementation of the CEFR in Vietnam, the need to understand teachers' perceptions of, and responses to, this language policy implementation are obvious. Yet limited research has been conducted around this issue. The impacts on the language education system, on teachers' and learners' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of the CEFR, on the effectiveness of such changes in (foreign) language policy, have not been considered. As the implementation process is both comprehensive and profound, the need for more research on adopting the CEFR to Vietnam is clear. For that reason, this research is an effort to explore the CEFR implementation in Vietnam from the grass roots perspective.

2 The study

2.1 Research setting

The present study examines GE teachers' perceptions of implementing the CEFR at a Vietnamese tertiary setting as opportunities for understanding teachers' voices to a 'top-down language reform policy' (Nguyen and Hamid 2015, Pham 2017) in Vietnam. Given that the large-scale CEFR implementation applies to both English major and non-major curricula, this study chose to focus more on the CEFR-aligned General English curriculum for non-English major students and the challenges GE teachers face during the process of implementing this curriculum.

Hue University, where this research was conducted, is a regional university in Central Vietnam. Its non-English major students come from the Central Highlands and the provinces and cities in the centre of the country. According to their major field of study, students attend different colleges of Hue University with Hue University for Foreign Languages having full responsibility for English teaching to students from all colleges. Students vary in terms of social backgrounds, major fields of study chosen, and English proficiency, but most enter university at the age of 18 years. Teachers also differ in origin, experiences, qualifications and expertise. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) mandated that, as a state-run university, Hue University must have its non-English major students achieve CEFR B1 level as one condition for being granted a university graduation degree.

MOET stipulated Level 3 (equivalent to CEFR-B1 level) as the minimum language proficiency requirement for university graduation of non-English major students. Since MOET sets the learning outcomes for learners independent of curricula and teaching materials, the burden on the shoulders of state-run universities, teachers and students is heavy. MOET also compels a 7-credit general English curriculum be provided for non-English major students before their B1 CEFR-aligned examination. In effect, non-English major students have a total of 105 teacher-led hours of English classes in their first three semesters, divided into 30-30-45 hours respectively, and are expected to achieve level B1. In theory, the majority of those students have already spent seven to ten years learning English at school, so the expected B1 CEFR-aligned learning outcome should be achievable. The reality is different: large numbers of students leave high school without being able to speak any English at all although they may have accumulated relatively good knowledge of its grammar and vocabulary (MOET 2014b). It is therefore, not surprising that the non-English major students of Hue University vary greatly in their English proficiency levels.

2.2 Research question

The research aims to address the following question: What are GE teachers' perceptions of the CEFR and of its implementation for non-English major students?

Specifically, the study explores GE teachers' understandings of the values of the CEFR, their perceptions of the need for the CEFR implementation and its readiness for application in their context, and their perceptions of the work involved in the implementation process.

2.3 Participants

The study's focus on GE teachers' perceptions of implementing the CEFR for non-English major students at Hue University determines the inclusion criteria for participation. Forty-five (45) teachers who have experience in teaching GE for non-English major students for at least a semester were invited to participate in the study. Thirty-six (36) of these participated in the survey, giving a response rate of 80%. The remaining nine (9) teachers either refused or were absent on the day of questionnaire delivery. Eight (8) of the thirty-six (36) participants took part in the semi-structured interviews. Teacher demographic information is shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1. *Demographic data of participants*

		Count
Gender	female	29
	male	7
Years of teaching non-English major students	< 5 yrs	7
	6-10 yrs	4
	11-20 yrs	17
	> 20 yrs	8
Highest qualification	Bachelor	5
	Master	30
	Doctor	1
Another Bachelor degree in languages	No	24
	Yes	12
CEFR training attended	By MOET	11
	By home university	26

Note. The total number of participants was 36.

Of these thirty-six (36) teachers, twenty-four (24) confirmed that the information and knowledge they have about CEFR and its application policy came from workshops provided by their home university, eighteen (18) from self-exploration including learning from colleagues and eleven (11) had the opportunity to attend CEFR training workshops conducted by the MOET. This suggests that a number of participants have attended more than one workshop on the CEFR and its implementation.

2.4 Research instruments

2.4.1 The questionnaire

A questionnaire (see Appendix for full form of the questionnaire) was used to gain quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of the CEFR implementation. It was developed and modified from a pilot questionnaire. Except for the first five questions about teacher demographics, the other twenty-seven (27) questionnaire items are in closed format.

Specifically, the first part of the questionnaire consists of five (5) questions investigating teachers' gender, teaching experiences and qualifications. The remainder of the questionnaire contains 27 five-point Likert scale items eliciting teacher perceptions of the CEFR implementation for non-English major students at Hue University. All of the items are developed and designed on the basis of a careful literature review of the CEFR and its implementation in different contexts. The 27 items were further divided into four main clusters focusing on the participants' perceptions of *the values of the CEFR, the readiness for the*

CEFR application, the necessity of applying the CEFR and *the work involved in the CEFR application process*. The five-point scale is coded in accordance with the logical way of thinking that the bigger the number, the higher the level of agreement is; i.e. 5 stands for "*strongly agree*", 4 for "*agree*", 3 for "*no idea*", 2 for "*disagree*" and 1 for "*strongly disagree*". Participants were asked to tick the number representing their level of agreement. A summary of the questionnaire is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Summary of the questionnaire*

Teachers' perceptions of the CEFR implementation	Items
Values of CEFR	3, 5, 8, 12, 13, 18
Necessity of CEFR application	20a, 20b, 20c, 20d, 20e, 20f, 20g, 20h
CEFR readiness for application	2, 9, 11, 15, 17,
Work involved in CEFR application process	1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 14, 16, 19

2.4.2 In-depth interview

Interviews were employed to provide richer data to complement the closed format of the questionnaire and to focus more on exploring the reasons underlying the participants' perceptions. Interview data helped to provide more insightful information and deeper clarification into the reasons for teachers' choices, why they perceived things in certain ways and what contextual factors influenced their perceptions (Creswell 1998). Identified issues developed from the quantitative questionnaire data became the basis for more in-depth exploration. Each interview had two parts (see Appendix for main interview questions). The first part consisted of a preamble and demographic questions. The main aim is to provide the participants with general information related to the purpose of the study, explain the ethical issues and establish good rapport between the interviewee and the researcher as well as to gather some demographic information from the interviewee. The main part of the interview explores further teachers' perceptions of the CEFR implementation in their context. Ten (10) main questions were developed in line with the four (4) afore-mentioned clusters from the questionnaire. For each question, the researchers also prepared in case there was a need to elaborate more on the participant's ideas and reflections. The order of the questions could also change, dependent on the flow of the interview but the same interview protocol was used to serve as a reminder for the researcher about the procedure and purpose of the interview (Creswell 2013) and to ensure consistency between all participants. The data provided an insightful exploration of general English teachers' perceptions; why they perceived the CEFR implementation process that way and what factors may have affected their cognition and understanding.

2.5 Data collection process

The data collection procedure of the present study followed Creswell and Clark's (2007) mixed method sequential model. The procedure lasted nine months from April to December 2017, beginning with the survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews for the pilot phase in April and May. After two months spent analyzing the pilot data and revising the instruments, the official questionnaire and interview questions were ready by the end of August 2017 and the survey was conducted between September and December 2017.

After the questionnaire had been collected and analyzed, eight interviews were conducted with eight participants who had agreed to do so. Each interview lasted about thirty minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and recorded for later transcription. The interviews were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Two or three weeks after the interviews, the researcher sent the transcripts to each participant for checking. No participant requested any changes to the transcripts.

2.6 Data analysis methods

Data analysis was conducted carefully and with consideration to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. Quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview data were analyzed separately using different techniques. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were dealt with first, using descriptive and analytic statistics, followed by qualitative findings from the transcribed interviews, coded into and counted by themes.

After data from the survey questionnaire had been collected and raw data input had been carried out, data cleaning and data filters were applied to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach Alpha value of .844 for the questionnaire was gained, proving the reliability of the questionnaire and data collected. To gather qualitative data from the interviews, these were transcribed and sent to the interviewees for accuracy checking, then the interview recordings were listened to many times and transcribed notes were read and reread, assisting in assuring the accuracy of the language captured by the transcribed notes. Simultaneously, participants' voices and tones were captured to gain deeper understanding of their perceptions and attitudes to the issues under investigation. As themes and sub-themes emerged from data analysis, a full list of corresponding themes was created. By doing this, researchers can find answers to the research questions and simultaneously develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell 2013). Qualitative findings from the interviews were used to triangulate with quantitative findings from the questionnaire and to verify quantitative findings against qualitative ones.

3 Findings and discussion

Firstly, the results of questionnaire data analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. *General English teachers' perceptions of the CEFR and its implementation*

No	Items	Contents	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The values of the CEFR			**36**	**3.97**	**.495**
1	3	CEFR can make learning outcomes transparent	36	4.19	.920
2	5	CEFR helps create mutual recognition across institutions	36	3.86	.798
3	8	CEFR encourages self-directed learning	36	3.92	.649
4	12	CEFR helps renew assessment practice	36	3.83	.878
5	13	CEFR can help renew curriculum	36	4.03	.774
6	18	CEFR can create positive changes in English language education	36	4.00	.632
The reasons and necessity of the CEFR implementation in Hue University			**36**	**3.60**	**.452**
7	20a	CEFR is a global comprehensive framework	36	3.94	.826
8	20b	The teachers involved in the process are ready	36	3.44	.843
9	20c	The students involved are ready	36	3.28	.914
10	20d	CEFR has been well applied in other countries	36	3.33	.676
11	20e	The university has all resources required	36	3.56	.877
12	20f	CEFR can help improve the teaching quality of the university	36	3.89	.708
13	20g	The university can promote its reputation	36	3.69	.822
14	20h	CEFR implementation will improve the language proficiency of the students of the university	36	3.69	.822

No	Items	Contents	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The CEFR readiness for application			**36**	**3.71**	**.594**
15	2	The CEFR descriptors of proficiency levels are representative	36	4.06	.715
16	9	CEFR is English-specific	36	3.39	.934
17	11	CEFR is context- specific	36	3.33	.926
18	15	CEFR is ready for any curriculum renewal	36	3.61	.934
19	17	CEFR descriptors need to be specified	36	4.17	.878
The work involved in the CEFR application process			**36**	**3.19**	**.570**
20	1	Necessary resources for the implementation were provided	36	3.86	.833
21	4	The implementation of the CEFR was piloted	36	2.69	1.142
22	6	Capacity building for the implementation (e.g. training workshops on the CEFR) was provided	36	3.81	.889
23	7	Staff involved were informed about the CEFR values and limitations	36	3.67	1.095
24	10	All teachers were involved in the CEFR-aligned curriculum design	36	1.56	.558
25	14	Staff involved were trained for the application/implementation procedure	36	3.39	.964
26	16	Expertise and professional support during the implementation process were provided	36	2.56	1.027
27	19	The objectives were realistic within the required timeline	36	3.06	1.068

3.1 General results

The average mean values of the four clusters ranged from 3.19 to 3.97, between levels 3 and 4 of the five-point Likert scale, which indicated that GE teachers had neutral to relatively positive perceptions of the CEFR and its implementation for their non-English major university students. Specifically, the level of teachers' agreement regarding the CEFR's value reached close to 4.0 (M= 3.97) and were slightly higher than those given to the need for the CEFR's application and its readiness for implementation (M=3.60 and 3.71 respectively). Nevertheless, they perceived the work involved in implementing the CEFR process as the lowest with a mean value of only 3.19. Of note is the fact that the first three clusters related more to the CEFR itself while the fourth concerns its application to General English for non-English major university students. It can be concluded that GE teachers have a generally sound understanding of the CEFR and its use. However, their perceptions of the CEFR implementation process were not as high. The next sections will present detailed discussion of these clusters together with the themes and sub-themes that emerged from interviews.

3.1.1 GE teachers' understanding of the values of the CEFR

Details of teachers' perceptions of the values of the CEFR can be seen in Table 3 above. Specifically, their agreement that CEFR can make learning outcomes transparent, can renew the curriculum and create positive changes in English language education reached above 4 of the five-point scale (4.19, 4.03 and 4.0 respectively). Other purposes such as encouraging self-directed learning, creating mutual recognition across institutions and renewing assessment practice received the mean values below 4 on the five-point scale of agreement (3.91, 3.86 and 3.83 respectively). Attention is drawn to the mean values of items being quite close to the mean value for the whole cluster of 3.97, suggesting that GE

teachers well understood the comprehensive objectives and principles of the framework including their application to non-English major students.

Data from the interviews generally aligned with quantitative findings. Of eight respondents, six teachers claimed that the CEFR's overall objectives met Vietnam's need for integration in the current situation. They also supported MOET's aims that the language proficiency of Vietnamese could be improved through implementation of the CEFR. From their comments, GE teachers' understanding of the values of CEFR could be captured. In brief, they understood that the policy for non-English major students was part of the bigger picture of efforts to boost foreign language education nationwide, at different levels of education and in different contexts, not just within their university. One teacher emphasized the potential to create mutual recognition between institutions with the CEFR-aligned outcomes, which was a favorable condition for students pursuing education at another university or institution.

In their context of teaching General English to non-English major university students, four out of the eight interviewed teachers expressed satisfaction with the CEFR division of language proficiency into six skill levels with concise descriptors for each level and for different language skills. They believed that this made the learning outcomes more specific and transparent. One participant also added that the descriptors "aided teachers and students a lot as they could see more clearly what and how they should do to get through to the end of their teaching and learning journey by looking at the B1 CEFR-aligned learning outcome". In other words, the interviewed teachers believed that their English teaching and learning became better oriented through the CEFR implementation. This finding was in line with that of Pham (2017). Data from the interview sessions also showed that teachers were aware of the interdependence among different domains of language education from outcomes, assessment to teaching materials and pedagogy. This idea reflected one feature, previously pinpointed by Little (2006), of the CEFR's contribution to language education worldwide.

In sum, GE teachers had a sound understanding of the CEFR's values. This finding was similar to that of Pham (2017) but differed from that of Nguyen and Hamid (2016). In Nguyen and Hamid (2016), the value of the CEFR to teachers was limited to "testing scores and numbers only" (p. 69). This difference could be partly explained by the different timing of research, with theirs being conducted during the first years of the CEFR implementation program while the present study was carried out six years after its first implementation. Another explanation may arise from the difference between the participant groups, the former investigating English language teachers of both English major and non-major students while the latter focused on GE teachers of non-major students only.

3.1.2. GE teachers' attitudes towards the necessity of the CEFR implementation

On average, the mean value of the whole cluster fell between 3 (*no idea*) and 4 (*agree*) (M=3.60). Synonymously, GE teachers were aware that implementing the CEFR at their home university was required, although their level of agreement was not high. Specifically, they agreed that the application of the CEFR was necessary because it provided a comprehensive global framework (M=3.94) and applying the CEFR would help to improve teaching quality (M=3.89), promote the university's reputation (M=3.69) and improve students' language proficiency (M=3.69). But they did not fully agree that the teachers, students and the university's resources were ready for this implementation. The mean values were close to middle value of 3.0 for the readiness of students, teachers and the university resources (M=3.28, M=3.44, and M=3.56 respectively) and indicated that teachers did not agree that their university was ready for such an application. In addition, they did not support the idea that it was necessary to apply the CEFR in Hue University because the framework has been successfully applied in other contexts (M=3.33).

There are two issues worth noticing from the quantitative results regarding GE teachers' perceptions of the necessity of the CEFR implementation. Firstly, all items showed high standard deviations (SD), with values ranging from .708 to .914, showing an ambit of teachers' viewpoints. In other words, GE

teachers' perceptions differed widely. Although the mean values of some items are quite high, it cannot be concluded that every teacher shared the same level of agreement. Secondly, the mean values varied greatly among items, revealing that the teachers had different perceptions regarding the necessity of applying the CEFR to non-English major students at their university.

Items related to the potential impacts and effects of the CEFR implementation, such as on the school's reputation, promotion, teaching quality and students' proficiency improvement received relatively positive rankings. In comparison, the items concerning school infrastructure and capacity readiness obtained a much lower level of agreement from GE teachers.

From the findings, it can be concluded that GE teachers' positive perceptions of the necessity of implementing the CEFR came mainly from their trust in the potential positive impacts such an/that implementation could bring about and not from their beliefs about the readiness of the people and resources involved in the process. This suggests the university really needed to work harder to better support and facilitate staff and students during the implementation process.

The data obtained from the interview sessions accorded with the questionnaire data. Of eight teachers interviewed, four strongly supported the need to apply the CEFR to non-English major students; three acknowledged the need but held concerns and reservations and one did not think it necessary to implement the CEFR. Supportive ideas yielded from the interview sessions were as follow: Firstly, the division by CEFR of language proficiency into six attainment levels made it more appropriate for different groups of language learners. For non-English major students, applying the CEFR-aligned outcomes of A1 and B1 seemed to be more practical and appropriate compared with previous standards, which were closely aligned with TOEIC and TOEFL tests. One teacher further explained that previous standards were more academic and thus more challenging for non-English major students whose language needs should be more focused on daily and communicative needs. This is understandable because the A1 and B1 CEFR descriptors are mainly focused on "familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc." (Cambridge 2011: 24), making them more appropriate for non-English major students.

Reasons for teachers' support also came from the expectation that CEFR implementation could create big changes to their teaching and learning contexts, either for the short or long term. In particular, one teacher mentioned the change in students' awareness which led to the changes in "learning methodology". Another added that "the policy is a motivation for students' language improvement". One teacher reflected, "it [the CEFR] affects students' perceptions, which (hopefully) will result in changing students' language competency". All interviewed teachers acknowledged the change in students' attitudes and motivation, which they confirmed to be present and easily recognized in their classes. Nevertheless, they were reluctant to discuss the actual changes in students' language competency and proficiency and admitted that such expectations were "too ambitious" to achieve, even six years after CEFR implementation began in Vietnam.

The second change pinpointed by all eight teachers was the modification and adaptation to teaching practices teachers had made, whether or not done voluntarily. They mentioned what they had done in their classes as evidence of their efforts to make changes accommodating the new policy and implementation. In short, the interviewed teachers observed three additional and direct impacts of the CEFR implementation: *changing students' attitude and motivation in English learning*, *improving teachers' classroom practices* and to some extent *improving the university's qualifications and reputation* and gave these as essential reasons for applying the CEFR framework to their non-English major students.

For teachers who did not perceive the CEFR implementation as necessary, doubt about its efficiency was the main reason given. They pointed to some previous standard-based outcomes and curricula as examples of unsuccessful policies and doubted that the CEFR implementation policy would fare any better. One teacher mentioned suitable planning and reasonable timelines as two basic principles for the students to achieve B1 level. In her view, these two key things were missing from the current environment of Hue University. Reluctance to change and adaptation to changes were additional

reasons for teachers' disagreeing with the requirement to implement CEFR. These teachers expressed their weariness at the previously abrupt and uninformed changes in language policy, specifically to the B1 standard-based learning outcomes, being unexpectedly imposed on teachers and students with limited notice and preparation time. They also expressed fear that just when they became accustomed to a new policy, the policy changed, making them, as one teacher stated: "passive and under a lot of unnecessary pressure". In short, although these concerns and disagreements were not prominent, they helped explaining why GE teachers did not consider the necessity to implement the CEFR as being high; ranking it the lowest average mean score of the four clusters.

3.1.3 GE teachers' perceptions of the CEFR readiness for application

In general, teachers partly agreed that the CEFR and its descriptors applied well to non-English major students, showing an average mean value of 3.71 for this cluster of questions. The mean value of individual items, however, varied greatly from a low of 3.33 to a high of 4.17. Specifically, GE teachers strongly believed that the descriptions of the CEFR levels of proficiency are representative (M=4.06) on the one hand, and that the CEFR needs to be more specific (M=4.17) on the other. Doubts that the descriptors are context-specific or English specific still remained but were not as strong (M=3.33 and 3.39 respectively).

The high SD values of nearly 1.0 to a majority of items showed that teachers' choices were dispersed, indicating inconsistency between individual teacher's perceptions of CEFR specificity. Given that the CEFR descriptors are neither language- nor context-specific, with the descriptions used for each level of proficiency being illustrative rather than representative (CoE 2001). This result should be given serious consideration. The teachers need better understanding of the levels of comprehensiveness of the CEFR descriptors as to use them more effectively.

The data from the interview sessions further explained teachers' perceptions and provided reasons for the quantitative results above. From the interviews, the contradiction between teachers' thinking could be identified and explained. On the one hand, teachers seemed to correctly understand that the CEFR is not a precise document that can be readily applied in every context without modification or adaptation. On the other hand, they were initially hesitant to talk about their uneasiness with the CEFR, which aspects of the CEFR are not suitable and which need improvement to make them more useable or relevant. This might be partly because they were not well trained in understanding this at the outset so did not feel confident enough to say what they think, and partly because of their commonly expressed belief that, as a global framework, the CEFR must be good and complete. Only after encouragement did the participants reveal their concerns more openly and completely. These concerns are described below.

Firstly, four of the eight interviewed teachers strongly agreed that the CEFR descriptors were representative and comprehensive in the levels of proficiency they seek to describe. The main reasons given were that language use at each level was not only divided into skills and sub-skills but also into domains, situations, areas, topics and strategies with all being clearly described for each proficiency level. On the CEFR implementation for non-English major students, however, the teachers provided detailed examples of the inappropriateness of the CEFR descriptors. Some of the descriptors were described as being *alienated* from Vietnamese students' age, ability, interest and concerns. They were also criticized for being *not specific*. The way terms like "basic", "short", "simple", "satisfactory" were used to describe levels of language proficiency failed to help teachers and students visualize clearly the scope and boundary of different levels. This finding accorded with warnings of CEFR limitations pointed out by Little (2006), showing limits to teachers' sound understanding of the CEFR and its descriptors. In addition, the finding was similar to that of Pham (2017). GE teachers also provided evidence of the mismatch between the CEFR and the current context of implementation, due to students' cultural differences, the reality of language need and students' level of proficiency.

3.1.4 GE teachers' dissatisfaction of the work involved in the CEFR implementation process

As seen in Table 3, the low average mean value of 3.19 for the whole cluster, close to point 3 of the five-point Likert scale, showed that teachers were far from satisfied with what had been done to implement the CEFR for non-English major students at Hue University. While some actions were acknowledged, others received strong criticism from the GE teachers, reflected in the wide range, from 3.86 to 1.56, of mean values between items. In particular, GE teachers agreed with the proposition that necessary resources and capacity building for the CEFR implementation had been provided. The mean values for the two items were 3.86 and 3.81 respectively. While GE teachers reported that they were trained, the training and workshops provided the teachers with knowledge of the CEFR's value (M= 3.67) rather than preparing them to apply the procedures (M= 3.39). Results from the questionnaire showed teachers had a neutral attitude towards the feasibility of the timeline (M= 3.06). In contrast, the last three items regarding the available support from experts, the piloting phase of the program and the involvement of teachers and students in CEFR-aligned curriculum design received negative comments from teachers, with all mean values below level 3 (2.69, 2.56 and 1.56 respectively).

Findings from the interview sessions provided better understanding of the data derived from the questionnaire. Although varying in number, all GE teachers interviewed reported their participation in workshops and training, organized by either MOET or their home university, related to the CEFR, its values and limitations and its descriptors. They observed and rated the facilities and resources made available for the CEFR implementation process. Better-equipped classrooms with computers, projectors, CD-players, together with supportive online software and programs were among resources listed by respondent teachers as efforts made by the university to help teachers and students achieve B1 level as the new standard-based learning outcome. They also listed their retraining and improving language proficiency workshops and the English proficiency tests that they participated in from 2011 to 2013 as evidence of the capacity building the university had provided in preparation for implementation. However, all teachers asserted that the CEFR-aligned curriculum was not piloted and they had no significant involvement in its design and development. It can be seen that, while the teachers had relatively sound understanding and perceptions of the CEFR, they were not well prepared for the process of actually implementing it in their own university context.

The interview data revealed that GE teachers were dissatisfied with the implementation process. Their discontent is associated with three main issues, namely time constraints, incompatible teaching materials and the tremendous gaps between students' entry levels of English proficiency and meeting the B1 learning outcome.

3.1.5 Time constraints

In interviews, GE teachers reported their dissatisfaction with the limited number of teacher-led hours assigned to each course. This was the biggest disquiet for GE teachers and led to the two other discontents. The phrase "time constraints" was repeated many times during six teacher interviews. In fact, for non-English major students at Hue University the curriculum specifies 30 teacher-led hours for A1 and A2 courses and 45 hours for B1 courses, which was stated to be "too limited do to anything".

One teacher complained: "We need adequate time to change students' language competence. Yet time allowance [for my non-English major students] to move from A1 to B1 is too limited". This viewpoint was shared by another teacher with her reflection that "the total 30 or 45 periods are not enough to improve students' language proficiency". The phrase "the pressure of time limits" was also raised in other teachers' interviews.

Limited, teacher-led, classroom interactions per week was another cause of the dissatisfaction expressed around time constraints. Due to the limit of 30 or 45 hours, non-English major students at Hue University attended only one class of two or three teacher-led hours each week. "The long interval

between one English classes and the next is enough for my students to forget everything (about English)", one teacher said.

A senior teacher with more than 25 years of teaching experience reported that time allowances for English language curricula for non-English major students had once been much longer, when the school-year programme was applied. The shift from a school-year to a credit-based programme considerably reduced the number of teacher-led, or classroom contact hours while increasing the time allotted to student self-study (or study outside the classroom without a teacher). For language learning, especially for non-English major students, this model has created huge challenges: "simply because not many non-English major students want and have the ability to self-study".

In short, with the current CEFR-aligned outcomes, insufficient time allowance was the biggest pressure GE teachers currently had to deal with. This finding is similar to what Faez, et al. (2011) found in their study where teachers indicated "time crunch" and insufficient time to implement CEFR activities and cover the demanding curriculum simultaneously.

3.1.6 Incompatible teaching materials

The dissatisfaction with the CEFR implementation process, reported by many teachers, was the mismatch between the assigned textbook and the CEFR-aligned outcomes. Many teachers noted that, together with the implementation of the CEFR-aligned outcomes, a new textbook series, *English Elements*, plus a later text entitled *Life,* were selected for course use by non-English major students at Hue University. *English Elements* was severely criticized as being incompatible with the CEFR-aligned outcomes. Some complaints and criticisms are cited below.

Many teachers maintained that *English Elements,* a textbook series by German publisher Hueber, was intended for and targeted on learners who were very unlike students at Hue University. In addition, teachers stated that the series was totally unsuited to the needs of a 105-period English curriculum. Selecting this series for non-English major students at Hue University caused challenges for both teachers and students. As one teacher explained:

> It's impossible to teach four books from the series [*English Elements*] in 105 periods, spread over a total of three semesters. Yet we had to. Comparing the CEFR descriptors for A1-B1 levels, we found that the books contained many irrelevant topics and themes, irrelevant exercises, irrelevant vocabulary and grammar….Some [vocabulary, grammar, topics, etc.] reappears or are repeated in more than one book, while many others, included in the descriptors, cannot be found anywhere [in the textbooks].

Regarding the textbook series *Life*, four (4) teachers reported that this series was better aligned with the A1-B1 CEFR learning outcomes as it focused more equally on the four basic language skills. However, its design indicated that its use required far longer than the 105 periods allocated in the current curriculum. Although challenges arose less from the book itself, GE teachers described problems in selecting content that would help students achieving the required learning outcomes within the allotted time. A senior teacher explained the problems with *Life* as follows:

> Take the A1 course as an example. Each unit in Life has six parts, from A to F, and a review, usually 12 pages long. And we have to teach 6 units, plus administer a mid-term test and an end-of-course speaking test. To do all this we have four periods per unit and three book pages per period. It is too challenging really.

In short, for the CEFR implementation process to be successful and to create changes, GE teachers needed to put in a lot of effort to develop and modify the text materials to align them with CEFR learning outcomes.

This demonstrates that, when the MOET set the CEFR B1 level of proficiency as the required learning outcome, teachers expected that the materials selected should support the achievement of this outcome. It also suggests their belief in the existence of suitable, ready-to-use materials. In contrast, however, teacher feedback on the text materials themselves showed a greater concern with how to deliver the materials within the limited timeframe rather than on how to make effective use of the prescribed materials. They showed less concern to evaluate the materials, adapt and prioritize sections, or select the tasks and topics most useful in supporting student acquisition of the required B1 level of proficiency than for the time limits imposed.

3.1.6 Mismatch between students' admission level of proficiency and learning outcomes

The third dissatisfaction originates from low levels of students' language proficiency at the course entry point. Two teachers thought that students' current proficiency was too low to allow them to achieve the B1 outcome (level three of the six levels) required of non-English major students after three semesters of university study. They cited the low percentage of non-English major students achieving the B1 certificate as evidence of this viewpoint. Six teachers mentioned the vast gap between students' actual English language competency and the level they were required to reach. It was also observed that the situation varied between students undertaking different majors and attending different colleges. One teacher commented:

> It depends on the students. In general, GE students majoring in medicine, pharmacy, or economics have better English language competency compared with students completing majors in other subjects. The B1-aligned outcome may be ok for them, if those students keep on working on their English. But the others, who form the majority, are not good enough.

This idea was widely held, with another teacher stating:

> We did have a placement test before admission so that we could classify students into different ability groups based on their level of English proficiency at entry. I would say that there are many students whose English was at A0 or lower. They simply knew nothing about English despite spending up to ten years learning English at primary, secondary and high schools. How can their English reach B1 level after 105 periods at Hue University?

In conclusion, although the problems may not come directly from the CEFR and the policy to implement it, the reality is that the low levels of students' English ability at the point of course entry have created huge challenges for both teachers and non-English major students at Hue University. From the viewpoint of those having to implement the policy, the mismatch between students' entry levels of English language proficiency and the standard they are required to achieve means that the outcome of students attaining a CEFR level B1 is totally unrealistic.

4 Conclusions and implications

The present study reveals some interesting findings regarding GE teachers' perceptions of the value and the necessity of applying a CEFR-aligned curriculum with standard-based learning outcomes in a specific context. It also displays their attitudes towards its implementation at the grass roots or classroom level. As "change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement and extraordinarily difficult to sustain" (Hargreaves and Fink 2006: 6), some implications and suggestions have been drawn.

Teachers' sound understanding of the value of CEFR coupled with their awareness of the requirement to implement the program within their university can be interpreted as willingness on their part to accept change and innovation in their classrooms, allowing a process whereby "perceptions influence practices" (Borg 2009). However, as a counterbalance, the study also shows that when it comes to the implementation process, GE teachers were not well prepared. Their needs were around lack of resources

and an understanding of the realities they were faced with. Their doubts about achieving positive results from such a program arose from a number of practical factors which together detracted from achieving the required CEFR outcomes. Given that change and innovation take place only when teachers perceive them as feasible (Van den Branden 2009), the GE teachers needed to be given a better understanding of how the changes would occur, what would be involved, and what practical problems to expect during the process. They need access to a forum where they can raise voices and make suggestions around the implementation process. The findings of this study also show that further studies should be conducted especially on teachers' actual practice as response to the implementation of such a global framework as the CEFR.

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6 Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Respondent's code: _____

Part 1. Personal information

Please tick or write the answers in the squares given.

1. Gender: ☐ male   ☐ female

2. How long have you been teaching non-English major students?

☐ 1-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-20   ☐ more than 20 years

3. What is your highest qualification?

☐ Bachelor   ☐ Master   ☐ Doctor (PhD)

4. Have you got another Bachelor Degree beside English one?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

5. Whose workshops on CEFR have you attended?

        ☐   By MOET

        ☐   By home university

        ☐   Others: _____

Part 2. The implementation of the CEFR at your university

Please circle the number reflecting the level of your agreement.

5: strongly agree, 4: agree; 3: neutral; 2: disagree; 1: strongly disagree

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1
1.	Necessary resources for the implementation were provided.	5	4	3	2	1
2.	The CEFR-aligned descriptors are representative for the language proficiency of its level.	5	4	3	2	1
3.	The CEFR can make language learning outcomes transparent.	5	4	3	2	1
4.	The implementation of the CEFR was piloted.	5	4	3	2	1
5.	The CEFR allows mutual recognition across institutions.	5	4	3	2	1
6.	Capacity building for the implementation (e.g. training workshops on the CEFR) was provided.	5	4	3	2	1
7.	Staff involved was informed about the values and limitations of the CEFR.	5	4	3	2	1
8.	The CEFR is meant to encourage self-directed language learning.	5	4	3	2	1
9.	The CEFR is applicable because it is English-specific.	5	4	3	2	1
10.	Teachers were involved in the CEFR-aligned curriculum design.	5	4	3	2	1
11.	The CEFR is applicable because it is context-specific.	5	4	3	2	1
12.	The CEFR can be used as a basis for the renewal of classroom assessment.	5	4	3	2	1
13.	The CEFR can be used as a basis for the renewal of the language teaching curriculum.	5	4	3	2	1
14.	Staff involved was trained for the implementation procedure.	5	4	3	2	1
15.	The CEFR is ready for any curriculum renewal.	5	4	3	2	1
16.	Expertise and professional support during the implementation process were provided.	5	4	3	2	1
17.	The CEFR-aligned descriptors need to be further specified to be applicable to the context in which it is used.	5	4	3	2	1
18.	The CEFR can be used for positive change in English language education.	5	4	3	2	1
19.	The objectives were realistic within the required timeline.	5	4	3	2	1

20.	The present implementation of the CEFR in Vietnam is necessary as:					
	CEFR is a global comprehensive framework.	5	4	3	2	1
	Teachers involved in the process are ready.	5	4	3	2	1
	Students involved are ready for such an application.	5	4	3	2	1
	CEFR has been well applied in many other countries for innovations in language teaching.	5	4	3	2	1
	My university has all the resources required for such an application.	5	4	3	2	1
	CEFR can help improve the teaching quality of the university.	5	4	3	2	1
	CEFR can help my university promote its reputation.	5	4	3	2	1
	CEFR implementation will improve the language proficiency of the students of the university.	5	4	3	2	1

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix 2. Main Interview Questions

(translated from the original Vietnamese version)

1. What do you know about the CEFR?
2. In your opinion why the CEFR is adopted at your university?
3. What do you know about the decision-making processes of applying the CEFR for non-English major students at your university?
4. Is the implementation of the CEFR for non-English major students at your university necessary? In what ways?
5. Do you think that the CEFR is ready for implementation for non-English major students at your home university? In what ways?
6. What do you think about the implementation of the CEFR for non-English major students at your home university? And why?
7. What challenges and difficulties have you encountered so far due to the CEFR implementation? What are the reasons for these problems?
8. What are your suggestions for effective implementation of the CEFR at your university and in contexts alike?

7 Biographies

Le Thi Thanh Hai is a lecturer of the Department of English for Specific Purposes of the University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. She has been teaching English for 19 years and involved in different projects on developing training curriculum for in-service English language teachers. She is a currently a PhD student of Hue University of Foreign Languages.

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