

English Language Assessment Practice in Vietnam: Interplay between Macro and Micro Context

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Article information

Abstract

Context has been recognized to exert a significant influence on language policy and planning (e.g., Cross, 2009; Gorsuch, 2000; Köksal & Şahin, 2012) as well as on teachers' decisions in the field of English language teaching and assessment (e.g., Fulmer et al., 2015; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). However, research on the interface among various contextual factors seems to receive limited attention. In the hope of contributing to the literature on context-related research and understanding the current landscape of English language assessment practice in Vietnam, this paper aims to look into the interaction between the macro (i.e., nationwide English language assessment policies and provision) and micro (i.e., institutional conditions and practice) context of the current practice. In-depth interviews with ministry specialists of education, institution or organization managers and leaders were employed in order to satisfy this aim. The interview data reveal the effect of the two contextual levels on each other, yet not all of the effect is positive. On the one hand, the macro contextual level potentially enables more consistent quality management at both national and institutional scale and more professional training for teachers who are believed, with

	higher assessment literacy, to improve their assessment practice accordingly. On the other hand, the micro contextual level apparently hinders the macro level on account of its limited resources and of teachers with diverse language and assessment competence. These findings serve as a basis for further discussion on how to address possible tensions among contextual factors so that beneficial effect can be magnified.
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1. Introduction

In a decentralized education system like Vietnam, language teachers are required to adhere to national education policies issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), as well as regulations set by more direct management levels such as the Provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET), District-level Bureau of Education and Training, universities/colleges, and schools. In other words, the context in which language teachers operate is shaped by multiple levels of organizational and professional rules. It is undeniable that each contextual factor can influence language teachers' decisions regarding both teaching and assessment activities. However, an additional concern arises: Do language teachers face challenges in their decision-making process due to varying levels of rules that may or may not consistently support one another? Existing literature has primarily focused on examining the impact of each contextual level on teachers' thoughts and actions (Dang & Cross, 2022; Fulmer et al., 2016; Liddicoat, 2014). Consequently, there appears to be limited research on the interaction among these contextual levels.

Noticeably, the Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR), for more than a decade, has been adopted or adapted as a guiding framework for English language teaching and assessment in a large number of countries, for example, Taiwan, Japan, China (Read, 2019), Turkey (Hazar, 2021), Malaysia (Savski, 2021), Thailand (Cheewasukthaworn, 2022), and Vietnam is also one of them (Le & Pham, 2019; Nguyen, 2020). Adherence to the use of CEFR, national language teaching and assessment policies in countries, including Vietnam, have undergone significant changes. These changes are assumed to have an impact on language teachers. However, it is important to note that language teachers' decisions are influenced not only by language teaching and assessment policies but also by various other contextual factors (e.g., Fulmer et al., 2015; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). As a result, the following questions arise: 1) When multiple contextual factors are active

simultaneously, which factor primarily affects teachers' thoughts and actions? 2) How do these contextual factors interact while influencing teachers' thoughts and actions? 3) Can the interaction among these contextual factors lead to changes in teachers' thoughts and actions?

In consideration of these issues and for the sake of better understanding the landscape of English language assessment practice in Vietnam, this paper aimed to examine the interplay between the current nationwide English language assessment policies and provision (i.e., macro context) and the institutional conditions and practice (i.e., micro context) from views of educational specialists and leaders. To put it differently, this paper focuses on the effect of the macro and micro context on each other when they exist together in Vietnam's educational system. In fulfilment of the research aim, the following questions were formed:

1. What are the macro and micro context of English language assessment practice in Vietnam as perceived by educational specialists and leaders?
2. What is the interplay between the macro and micro context in English language assessment practice in Vietnam?
3. In what ways are the stakeholders influenced by the interplay between the macro and micro context in English language assessment practice in Vietnam?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Macro and Micro Contexts

Context has been implicitly or explicitly focused in a myriad of research, ranging from research on language learning, teaching and assessment (e.g., Gholami et al., 2012; Graham, 2021; Fulmer et al., 2015), teacher learning and development (e.g., Dang, 2017; Dang & Cross, 2022; Le & Nguyen, 2012; Salinas, 2017; Shulman & Shulman, 2004), to language policy and planning (e.g., Cross, 2009; Gorsuch, 2000; Köksal & Şahin, 2012; Liddicoat, 2014).

The scope of context varies in different studies, but the concept refers to facets of a situation, tangible or intangible, that inspire feelings, thoughts, and actions of groups or individuals. It can be the facets in direct relation to the teacher (e.g., Dang, 2017; Kozma, 2003; Le & Nguyen, 2012; Shulman & Shulman, 2004), program-related factors (e.g., Dang, 2017), classroom boundaries (e.g., Kozma, 2003), surrounding communities (e.g., Shulman & Shulman, 2004), institutional or national policies (e.g., Dang, 2017; Gorsuch, 2000; Shulman & Shulman, 2004), social and cultural influences (e.g., Gorsuch, 2000; Kozma, 2003). Although the contextual dimensions can be treated independently, a number of scholars and researchers prefer to categorize them into groups. For example, Gorsuch (2000) points out a variety of contextual dimensions that influence teachers' teaching approach, naming them "formal instructional guidance" and "informal instructional guidance" (p. 680). Among formal instructional guidance are educational policy statements which serve as the instructional framework to follow. Among informal instructional guidance are broader contextual dimensions (i.e., social and cultural influences) and narrower contextual dimensions (i.e., intraschool influences, teachers' abilities, and students' abilities). Kozma (2003, as cited in Fulmer et al., 2015), on the other hand, categorizes contextual factors into "micro, meso, and macro" (p. 476). Micro level refers to the factors associated with "individual students and teachers"; meso level relates to "the factors immediately pertinent to the classroom, within the school or its surrounding communities"; meanwhile, macro level includes "education policies at the national level, state level and district level" and "cultural norms around education and assessment, as well as social and economic pressures" (p. 477). These categories are also found in Fenton-Smith & Gurney's (2016) study on actors and agency in academic language policy and planning. However, many other scholars and researchers define the contextual dimensions at macro and micro level without mentioning meso level, which is believed to fulfil their research aim(s).

Another noticeable thing is that the terms “macro” and “micro” are not defined the same in different studies. According to Horner and Bellamy (2016), these terms “may be useful for succinctly establishing the focus of a study as on a narrower or broader context” (p. 321). Although in the simplest way, the micro level is thought to be factors related to the individual, and the macro level concerns structured organizations (Horner & Bellamy, 2016, pp. 320–321), the macro level is at times associated with policy contexts whereas the micro level refers to educational contexts (Cross, 2009, p. 37). In another case, the macro level concerns sociocultural context; meanwhile, the micro level is associated with institutional factors (Villa Larenas, 2021). To put it differently, how large the macro level or how small the micro level depends on how it is defined in a specific circumstance for a specific purpose. In the present study, the macro and micro context were informed by the aspects of Language Assessment Literacy Model for the Teaching Profession (LAL-TEP) (Villa Larenas, 2021). Accordingly, the nationwide English language assessment policies and provision are considered to be macro – the broader context. The institutional conditions and practice are considered to be micro – the narrower context.

2.2 Interplay between the Macro and Micro Contexts

Among a great number of studies on context-related educational activities are those on the macro and micro context (e.g., Cross, 2009; Dang & Cross, 2022; Liddicoat, 2014; Horner & Bellamy, 2016; Salinas, 2017; Wang, 2008). Nonetheless, most of the research highlights individual teachers’ practice, either in teaching and learning or in assessment, under the influence of the macro context. For example, Wang (2008) investigates teachers’ perceptions of the language policy implementation in the Chinese tertiary context, indicating one-way relationship between the macro context (i.e., language policies) and the micro context (i.e., teachers’ perceptions and practice). Another example is the study by Dang and Cross (2022). Even though different contextual dimensions from the broader to the narrower (i.e., cultural-historical domain, ontogenetic domain, and microgenetic

domain) are discussed, the study focuses on the influence of these dimensions on teachers' practice rather than the other way round.

It is indicated in many studies that the macro context exerts a certain effect on the micro level, for example, strengthening or weakening teachers' identity (e.g., Horner & Bellamy, 2016; Salinas, 2017), facilitating teachers' collaboration and learning (e.g., Dang, 2017), promoting the adoption of an instruction approach (e.g., Dang & Cross, 2022; Gorsuch, 2000; Liddicoat, 2014). However, it is pointed out from Wang's (2008) study that the macro contextual level does not seem to have a positive influence on the micro practice without sufficient guidance and/or with slight degree of teachers' willingness. In particular, teachers' executions are not in line with policymakers' intentions. Despite being equipped with the curriculum, a policy-related element, that is expected to guide teachers' practice, they make their own decisions upon their preference. According to Wang (2008), "from the teachers' point of view, such eclecticism implied that they could adopt whatever methods they preferred. This absence of guidance, in fact, may have encouraged teachers to stick to the teaching method they felt most comfortable with..." (p. 15).

In this vein, teachers play an important role in ensuring effective policy implementation; therefore, the more they engage in the process of policy making or innovation, the less superficial policy implementation can be. Besides teachers, middle-level managers and principals are expected to be involved in the process (Köksal & Şahin, 2012). Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2016) even emphasize the necessity of a mechanism to facilitate the coordination between people with power and people with expertise. They state that "the transition from policy to planning was done in a variety of ways in the different contexts ... The missing element in many of these contexts was a mechanism for the systematic coordination of policy and planning" (pp. 84–85).

Being linked with the aforementioned idea about three levels of context, Köksal and Şahin's (2012) and Fenton-Smith and Gurney's (2016) views seem to advocate the necessity of the middle contextual level to relate the macro (i.e., policies) and micro context (i.e., teachers' practice). Nonetheless, the interface between the macro and micro context seems to be more highlighted while the interaction between the middle level and the macro and/or micro level is apparently bypassed (Fulmer et al., 2015). In fact, these contextual levels, including the elements within these levels, may have a two-way interaction, as shown in the three-layer framework proposed by Shulman and Shulman (2004) to examine how contextual factors affect teacher learning. Specifically, the first layer consists of the individual-related factors (i.e., vision, understanding, practice, motivation); the second layer refers to the teacher communities where individual teachers are situated (i.e., shared vision, knowledge base, community of practice, shared commitment and support); and the third layer refers to a broader space where multidimensional support (i.e., venture capital, moral capital, curricular capital, and technical capital) is provided for teacher learning. The authors specify the relationship between the individual layer and the community layer as "the individuals contribute to the formation of the community norms, incentives, and practices even as the community exercises its influences on the participating individuals" (p. 267). Likewise, they emphasize the importance of adequate provision from the policy/resource layer to facilitate teacher learning, as well as the influence of teachers' interpretation and adaption on this outermost layer. However, the interaction among these layers does not seem to be discussed in detail.

It is indicated from the literature that there exists an interface between different contextual levels, but the attention to such interaction has been much drawn in the field of teacher learning or policy and planning. Meanwhile, in the field of English language assessment practice, the interaction among contextual factors has been under-researched. For the gap in the literature and the practical issue

(i.e., innovation in English language assessment in recent years), the present study examines the interplay between the nationwide English language assessment policies and provision (i.e., macro context) and the institutional conditions and practice (i.e., micro context).

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Participants

The data were collected in Vietnam, where the national education system encompasses formal and non-formal education and includes four main levels:

- Early Childhood Education: nurseries (3 months–3 years old) and kindergarten (3–5 years old);
- General Education: primary education (grades 1–5), lower-secondary education (grades 6–9), and upper-secondary education (grades 10–12);
- Vocational Education and Training (VET); and
- Higher Education

In general, Vietnam has a decentralized system in which the administration of education and training is undertaken at both central and local levels. At the central level, MOET is responsible for the overall national education system, except for VET, as a government agency performing the function of state management. MOET's main responsibilities include developing education policy, curricula for early childhood and general education; identifying learning outcomes for higher education; setting standards for textbooks and teaching materials, budget planning and quality assurance.

At the local level, schools are under the administration of DOETs, and District-level Bureaus of Education and Training. At the national level, MOET's policies and curriculum ensure homogeneous standards for goals and regulations across the country. However, management responsibility for school buildings, staffing, and the distribution of financial resources is with local governments.

Upper secondary schools and professional schools are managed at the provincial level by DOETs, and lower secondary schools and primary schools are managed locally by District-level Bureaus of Education and Training. In addition, a number of high-quality special or gifted schools operated by universities are administered by MOET rather than local authorities. As a result, schools and educational institutions find themselves in varying conditions across different educational levels, including primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary, and higher education; as well as across various sectors, such as the public and private sectors.

With the aim of understanding the interplay between the macro and micro context of English language assessment in Vietnam, the present study adopted the qualitative approach. Five participants of the study were purposively selected for interviews. All of them, who came from different educational levels, including MOET, a university, a school, and an international organization, worked closely on education policies and planning. This participant selection method follows Stake's (1995) view in which opportunities for intensive study are emphasized rather than representativeness of the concerned population. In the present study, the selected specialists and leaders could, on the one hand, represent the people operational at macro and micro contexts, and on the other hand provide in-depth insights into the nationwide English language assessment policies and provision of guidelines/teacher training (i.e., macro context) as well as the institutional conditions and practice (i.e., micro context). Specifically, two officers from MOET were expected to provide adequate information about the current policies on English language assessment. As they were the key staff responsible for drafting and delivering primary and secondary language education policies, they were presumed to have a better understanding of the macro context, and their ideas were likely to be informed by this broader perspective. Furthermore, these specialists also closely worked with the local authorities in various capacities including policy operation and implementation, key-staff training, and routine supervision, so they were expected to possess comprehensive knowledge and

insights into the micro context. The other three participants were selected from institutions with distinct features, as outlined in Table 1. This selection includes representatives from both the public and private sectors. Their inclusion was crucial as they were anticipated to offer diverse perspectives based on their institutional conditions and practices, in addition to providing general insights into the issue.

Overall, the present study delves into a comprehensive examination of the interaction between the macro and micro contexts in a variety of educational institutions, ranging from the public to the private sector and from the school to university level. Although an undeniable limitation of the study is that the five participants cannot be representative of the voices of all stakeholders involved in education policies and planning in Vietnam, their views were meaningful to those operating in similar contexts. The insights provide an informative snapshot of the landscape of education policy delivery and implementation in Vietnam.

Table 1

Participant Profile

Participant	Position	Roles	Type of Institution
SL1	An officer in charge of secondary language education department	Draft national policy papers on English education and assessment in secondary schools (both lower- and upper-secondary levels); supervise the practices of teaching and learning of English in secondary schools across the country; cooperate with other departments and agencies in the Ministry to carry out the policies made by the Ministry; construct	MOET

Participant	Position	Roles	Type of Institution
SL2	An officer in charge of primary language education department	the policies for carrying out the central orientation and the general approach for secondary education in Vietnam Draft national policy papers on English education and assessment in primary schools; oversee the teaching and learning of English in primary schools all over the country; cooperate with other departments and agencies in the Ministry to carry out the policies made by the Ministry; construct the policies for carrying out the orientation and the general approach for primary education in Vietnam	MOET
SL3	A vice rector	Implement national and ministerial policies of English education and assessment at institutional level; design context-based policies and strategies to achieve university goals and missions; oversee the English education, assessment and research at the university	A public language university
SL4	A principal	Implement sectoral and DOET's policies of English education and assessment at school level; design context-based policies and strategies to achieve school goals and missions; oversee teaching and assessment activities in the	A self-financed public lower-secondary school

Participant	Position	Roles	Type of Institution
SL5	An educational specialist	school; supervise and approve of assessment plans for all subjects in order to avoid overlapping and heavy workload for both teachers and students Design and implement collaborative projects of English education and assessment, and English teacher training with MOET, DOETs and educational institutions (universities and schools); provide consultancy on policy making for MOET and DOETs; support resources for teachers, schools and universities based on their local needs and contexts	British Council

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

An interview protocol was employed as the data collection instrument for the present study. Two members of the research team formulated the protocol which was built upon the contextual aspects of the LAL-TEP model (Villa Larenas, 2021). Then the other members reviewed and revised it before the whole team finalized the protocol. Specifically, it was divided into two main parts, in addition to a question about the respondents' recommendations for better practice. The first part consisted of questions about the key policies for English language assessment as well as the adoption and adaptation of the CEFR in Vietnam. The second part focused on the implementation of the key policies in both state and private universities/schools as well as the related issues (e.g., positive impacts, challenges, actions and conditions for translating policies into practice, etc.).

Each interview with the participants lasted around 40 to 50 minutes and was conducted in either English or Vietnamese. The selection of the interviewing language was determined by the participants themselves, as not all of them were proficient in English. Moreover, the data collection quality is believed to be dependent on the rapport and relationship established between the researcher and the respondent (Pavlenko, 2002; Stake, 1995). Pavlenko (2002) emphasizes:

Recent research convincingly demonstrates that narratives are not purely individual productions – they are powerfully shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor (whether an interviewer, a researcher, a friend, or an imaginary reader) (p. 214).

It can be interpreted from the above quote that if the interviewer and the respondent get to know each other before the interview is conducted, the respondent is likely to be more willing to share his/her views. Meanwhile, it is still critically important for the researcher to avoid his/her bias and/or leading questions during the interview. In the present study, the research member whom a respondent knew better was in charge of the interview with that respondent to maximize the chance of getting in-depth information from him/her. Additionally, in order to ensure the objectivity of the data collection process, research members maintained a neutral tone during the interviews and primarily posed open-ended questions.

The data analysis and interpretation went through a number of steps: (1) transcribing the interviews verbatim; (2) translating if the interview was in Vietnamese; (3) coding; (4) inducing themes. The themes were induced based on the contextual aspects of the LAL-TEP model (Villa Larenas, 2021). Particularly, the coding process started with searching the keywords related to contextual aspects line by line. The codes were then categorized into macro and micro levels.

Next, the keywords showing the effects of the macro and micro context on each other were identified and assigned names.

As qualitative analysis is interpretive (Dörnyei, 2007; Merriam, 2009), it is essential to mitigate bias. Therefore, the data were independently coded, and themes were induced by different members of the research team before reaching a consensus on the codes and themes. In other words, the credibility of the study was upheld through analyst triangulation (Patton, 1999).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Macro and Micro Contexts

As revealed from the data, the macro context, which was reported by the MOET's specialists, was realized in the discussion of institutions' specialists and leaders. Likewise, the views expressed by the MOET's specialists on the micro context were illustrated by evidence given by institutions' specialists and leaders. This part will present aspects of the macro and micro contexts emerging from the data collected from these specialists and leaders.

4.1.1 The Macro context

The first aspect of the macro context in the present study is the policy on standardization of English language assessment. This policy is reflected through the application of a common framework as the standards for assessment and the emphasis on the necessity of test specifications and a matrix for periodical tests. Accordingly, CEFR and its adapted version (CEFR-VN) have been applied in Vietnam. This framework serves as the reference for all educational activities, from building curricula to selecting teaching materials, designing tests, or setting the outcome standards for learners.

According to the MOET's specialists, official documents have been issued for different educational levels, containing "matrix and [test] specifications" for

secondary schools and “format of assessment” for primary schools, to reach a set of standards adopted from the CEFR.

... for macro level, we use CEFR as the guideline to build the curricula for teaching ... and also regarding testing, it is utilized in designing the matrix and the specifications so that every teacher can follow and construct almost similar-level tests for students. (SL1 – excerpt 1)

... primary school students need to have English output reaching level 1 of the CEFR-VN ... This is the decision to issue the format of assessment for primary schools ... to design a test for students in grade 5 after completing primary school to measure whether the investment and teaching of English in the local area up to the standard. (SL2 – excerpt 2)

The achievement of this standardization is observed in both public and private sectors, as recognized by specialists and leaders from various institutions

... apply standardized test in assessing learners’ English proficiency ... standardize the format of the questions and we have been training teachers in designing test matrix, test questions, designing the test for measuring the students’ outcome in terms of language proficiency. (SL3 – excerpt 3)

CEFR is a common set of standards to describe language ability ... we know at which level of the framework their students are and which textbooks they should use for their students ... choose the supplementary materials or design assessment activities. (SL4 – excerpt 4)

CEFR is the common kind of knowledge in the ELT in Vietnam... promote an international standard ... at the university level and at school level and with a new textbook with the new curriculum. And even with the private language centers as well. (SL5 – excerpt 5)

The second aspect of the macro context of the study is the policy related to the adoption of a competence-based approach in assessment. Currently, assessment activities in Vietnam are shifting towards a greater emphasis on assessment for learning, and teachers are encouraged to utilize various assessment methods and tools, moving beyond traditional tests to evaluate their students' learning.

... we have continuous assessment in which comments, opinions and review, other non-conventional types of assessment and evaluation are recommended and suggested. We no longer focus on score like before ... We ask the teachers to focus on assessing all the skills. (SL1 – excerpt 6)

Circular 27 is close to the current assessment approach in the world, that is, it is divided into 2 segments – regular assessment and periodical assessment. Among two types, regular assessment is emphasized and requires schools to focus more on it. (SL2 – excerpt 7)

... Instead, teachers have been required to conduct regular assessment and mark mid-term and end-of-term tests. This indicates that the policies have been focusing on ongoing assessment ... Specifically, besides tests, many other methods such as projects or portfolios have been used. (SL4 – excerpt 8)

... but again, there's a specific section in there about assessment and testing. Particularly as you'll know when the move from, you know, more summative testing to more formative assessment... I know that's something that the director might be very keen on trying to further that agenda. (SL5 – excerpt 9)

Even though the specialists and leaders used different terms, “continuous assessment”, “regular assessment”, “ongoing assessment”, or “formative assessment”, their excerpts indicate a focus on ongoing evaluations of student

learning, implying that the policy was disseminated from the national level and was well understood at the local levels.

The third aspect of the macro context is the provision of guidelines/teacher training. According to a specialist from the MOET, whenever a new policy or requirement is introduced, seminars and workshops are organized to provide teachers with guidance as well as to allow teachers to voice their views. This action helps to ensure teachers' understanding and the effective implementation of the newly-delivered policy. He emphasized:

We are open to questions from the local departments. For example, if the problem is minor, we can support them with immediate response. For bigger problems, we have instructions or guidelines officially issued from the Ministry to solve the problem. (SL1 – excerpt 10)

This support is confirmed by another specialist from the MOET:

... Well, with public schools they have to follow the requirements in terms of form. But in terms of content, in terms of expertise, it also has some difficulties for teachers so the Ministry is making efforts in developing documents, training and providing supplementary documents to build learning resources to support teachers ... (SL2 – excerpt 11)

These governmental efforts to support teachers have been recognized by other stakeholders in the field. The leader of a lower-secondary school even commended the district-level Bureau of Education and Training for their support for local teachers.

I see that they [the district-level Bureau of Education and Training] have recently organized a lot of training on that, giving teachers a clearer awareness of determining the students' ability or the lesson objectives. That is the success of the recent teacher training, and in so doing, schools can easily determine the outcomes for their

students... They have done a good job when popularizing this concept towards the school teachers. (SL4 – excerpt 12)

4.1.2 The Micro Context

The micro context, which can either facilitate or hinder policy implementation and the quality of teacher training, involves human resources, financial resources, professional resources, and local planning and practices. Regarding human resources, both specialists from the MOET emphasized the importance of teacher quality, which is founded on language competence and assessment literacy:

... Teachers come from different sources ... They come from in-training services or they come from different areas. As you may know, different universities may train or may have different levels ..., so we have low-quality teachers ... For the teacher quality, that [the change] cannot be done overnight. (SL1 – excerpt 13)

In reality, there are many teachers whose English level is below B2, and without a university degree. Even it's B2, it's been many years, the competence has dropped a lot in the past few years ... Also, many teachers don't really have standard pronunciation ... Some teachers do not really understand what qualities and competencies are and how to teach those qualities and competencies; how to evaluate such qualities and competencies. (SL2 – excerpt 14)

Besides teacher quality, teacher willingness is another aspect of the micro context. According to one specialist from the MOET and the school leader, the biggest challenge for the policymakers at the national level is to change teachers' attitudes.

... the biggest challenge for us is to change teachers' attitude towards using the new teaching and testing methods. For those who are open to changes, it's OK. But for quite a number of

teachers, they have problems because when we change the teaching techniques or methods ... the testing approach ... because they don't want to change. (SL1 – excerpt 15)

... the first challenge is the readiness of the recipients because sometimes policies are issued in a hurry at the beginning of the school year ... people are not ready to apply something new; moreover, the time for them to learn about it is too little. (SL4 – excerpt 16)

The consensus on these two contextual aspects related to human resources was implicitly reached by the other three respondents, who emphasized the necessity of teacher training and open dialogues with teachers about assessment reform. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted financial resources as an aspect of the micro context, underscored by the varying investments made by public and private schools in educational equipment and resources.

The main difference between private schools and state schools is the source of funding. For state schools, the funding is from the state. For private schools, the funding is from the private sector. They have to follow closely all guidelines and instructions, the same as state schools. However, they have more freedom. (SL1 – excerpt 17)

In private schools, the teaching of English is often enhanced and more open. They have additional things to match with the goals and to achieve the goals of the program ... They have rich and abundant sources. (SL2 – excerpt 18)

The respondents also demonstrated their understanding of the necessity of available materials, or professional resources, to teachers who are mandated to achieve the reformed teaching and assessment goals.

... when having to design a test mainly on listening skills, teachers face a lot of difficulties to get the data (audio files) of those listening tests. Because if taken directly from online sources,

sometimes the test doesn't match with the teacher's wishes about that test, at that stage, and be suitable for students ... (SL2 – excerpt 19)

Local planning and practice refer to the time frame of policy implementation, guidance at the decentralized levels, and teacher recruitment. According to the respondents, time is a critical contextual factor for a successful transformation to take place.

To do anything effectively, we still need to have big resources, commitment, energy and even time. If we don't have enough time, it's hard for you to support anyone. For example, in my case, I try to organize my network but it's not easy because a lot of teachers just expect to have something ready or available for them. (SL1 – excerpt 20)

Going back to the second problem, I must say the problem lies in the fact that teachers do not have enough time, as well that the school's time frame is unable to do all the assessment according to the standards as they want. (SL2 – excerpt 21)

We need time for everyone to get familiar with the new methods, the new ways of thinking, especially when not only teachers and students but also parents are stakeholders ... Without parents' understanding, it's hard for students to follow the new requirements. (SL4 – excerpt 22)

According to one specialist from the MOET, the national level issues policies and provides general guidance while specific guidance needs to be delivered by the DOETs and specific institutions. He stated that if the DOETs does not understand how to implement the policies appropriately, their requirements may generate more workload for teachers under their control.

That's a really big difficulty and sometimes for some local Department of Education and Training, they apply the idea ... I don't

know how to use the exact word, but like they don't know how to carry out the idea so they ask the teachers to write down everything in students' academic record. That creates a lot of workloads for teachers. (SL1 – excerpt 23)

Another specialist from the MOET revealed a reality about some schools where the number of English teachers was limited but teacher recruitment could hardly be done.

... there are areas with available slots and are willing to recruit, but they cannot recruit because teachers do not want to work in difficult areas ... There are not enough teachers and the case that often happens is 1 teacher / 1 school. (SL2 – excerpt 24)

In the next part, the interplay between these contextual aspects at the macro level and those at the micro level will be presented.

4.2 Interplay between the Macro and Micro Contexts

Two themes emerging from the data about the interplay between the macro and micro contexts are consistent quality management and two-way tension. They will be presented along with evidence from the data in the following part.

4.2.1 Consistent Quality Management

The first and foremost important effect of the macro context on the micro context is created through new educational policies issued by MOET.

No matter what textbook they [schools] use, they have to follow the guidelines, they have to follow the curriculum ... They have to use curriculum as the guideline or the core to build their [test] items around the curriculum. (SL1 – excerpt 25)

MOET has also issued instructions and official documents in the guidelines on the tasks of the school year for schools across the country to transfer and approach the assessment direction of

Circular 27 [on the assessment of primary school students]. (SL2 – excerpt 26)

The policies and attached guidelines are believed to ensure a consistent quality management at different levels and across both public and private sectors. Both specialists from the MOET stressed that it was a must for institutions across the country:

Most of the schools in Vietnam are state run so they are funded by state budget. So, they have to follow the policies, they have to follow the administrative instructions from different administrative levels ... private ones have to adopt the national curriculum in their schools, no exception ... when we organize a training workshop, the teachers from private schools are invited just like the teachers from state schools. (SL1 – excerpt 27)

In fact, both public and private schools have to apply these policies. All schools are required to apply these assessment regulations. In public schools, these policies are strictly applied. However, in private schools, the teaching of English seems to be more open. (SL2 – excerpt 28)

It is evidenced from the above quotes that all schools and educational institutions systematically follow a common curriculum – the national curriculum. In other words, what has put effort into by the national level is to create consistent quality management in which both the macro and micro levels are based on the same standards to measure students' English language competence. Even if institutions choose different textbooks and teaching materials, they need to ensure that their teaching focuses on core competence and their students meet the outcome standards when they graduate. This aim is acknowledged by the leader of a lower-secondary school:

... when English teaching is consistent among secondary schools, the schools will have the same yardstick to look at their students'

results, or the schools can see where they are on the national education map. It's at the larger scale outside schools. (SL4 – excerpt 29)

This finding seems to be in line with that of the previous studies which prove the influence of the macro context on the micro context at a large scale. Particularly, the introduction of new policies encourages the stakeholders to follow the same instruction approach (e.g., Dang & Cross, 2022; Gorsuch, 2000; Liddicoat, 2014). In the present studies, the fact that the new policies were issued has led to the nationwide adoption of new teaching and assessing approaches which were competence-based and standardized (excerpts 1 – 9). Yet it is noticeable from this study that the policies have not only facilitated individual teachers' adoption but also enabled consistent management of educational and assessment quality across administrative levels.

However, it cannot be denied that the reformed policies contain certain new concepts (i.e., CEFR, competence-based teaching and learning). These concepts have made it difficult for teachers to successfully implement the policies without adequate guidance or training (excerpts 12 and 13), which is consistent with Shulman and Shulman's (2004) and Wang's (2008) findings. To put it differently, the lack of language competence and assessment knowledge among the recipients at the micro level leads to the need for large-scale and in-depth training as well as other support from the macro level. In this essence, the micro context (i.e., teachers' existing competence and assessment knowledge) exerts an influence on the macro level's actions (i.e., professional training at different administrative levels) when consistent quality management is the target. This is evidenced by the information collected from both MOET specialists and a university leader:

We support the teachers to achieve the goal, the objective of education. So, we want to stand beside them, provide them with all the support they need in order to achieve the goal. So, in general, the quality of education is improved. (SL1 – excerpt 30)

... training the core staff, then the core staff trained those in the province, these trainees returned to the province to train those in smaller areas, who returned to training for teachers at schools and so on ... (SL2 – excerpt 31)

Although Wang (2008) does not mention that teachers' perceptions and actions are a premise of multi-level consistent quality management, the author postulates that the lack of guidance “may have encouraged teachers to stick to the teaching method they felt most comfortable with” (p. 15). Implicitly, in case teachers follow what they are contented with, the quality management can hardly be consistent across levels. In this vein, teacher-related aspects, as an element of the micro context, have a role to play in promoting proper actions at the macro level. Shulman and Shulman (2004) also advocate this idea by stating “the individuals contribute to the formation of the community norms, incentives, and practices” (p. 267). Even though “community” in Shulman and Shulman’s (2004) study does not indicate the policy layer, their view shows the significance of the narrower layer to the broader layer.

4.2.2 Two-way Tension

All institutions in both public and private sectors are required to adhere to national policies and participate in official training (excerpts 1, 2, 27, and 28). However, they have different needs and conditions, which creates tension in the micro context. Key terms (i.e., CEFR, competence-based learning and teaching) which are presented in the policies, may not be commonly understood, and comprehending those key terms requires the reader to possess certain professional knowledge. Additionally, as mentioned above, the educational system in Vietnam is decentralized. This means that each administrative level wields a certain degree of authority over how the policies are implemented (excerpt 23). Even teachers can exercise flexibility in their choices of activities and methods, provided that they align with the common goals.

We adopt an open-ended approach. So, teachers can adapt what they think are the most suitable for their teaching and students. We no longer focus on score like before. We advise teachers to focus more on students' progress, or in other words, continuous assessment. (SL 1 – excerpt 32)

The guidelines and instructions for policy implementation are provided from general to specific at different administrative levels (excerpt 31), and if one administrative level misinterprets the policies, the levels under it may face adverse consequences (excerpt 23). The important role of the middle administrative level is also identified by Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2016), and Köksal and Şahin (2012).

Another tension that the macro context puts on the micro one is because of how and when policies are delivered. The leader of a lower-secondary school stated:

... sometimes policies are issued in a hurry at the beginning of the school year. Usually in the first 2 months of the school year around September and October, policies are introduced, but in September and October the teachers are too busy setting up a lot of things and it's quite late because the teachers are going back to school and even, they have worked at school for one or two weeks. (SL4 – excerpt 33)

It is interpreted from the above quote that the school managers and teachers did not have sufficient time to grasp the requirements placed upon them. That the timing of policy delivery might not have been suitable, leading the recipients to reluctantly accept the policies and continue using their old methods.

... the teacher still follows the old way, focusing too much on language knowledge without focusing on using that language as well as developing other competencies and qualities. (SL1 – excerpt 34)

On the other hand, the limited resources (i.e., human resources, financial resources, and professional resources) were mentioned as obstacles created by the micro context for the implementation of key policies (excerpts 13, 14, 17 – 22).

... But because of the limitation in time, in human resources and facilities, the school-leaving examination is paper-based and focuses mainly on things that are possible to write down on paper. So that's kind of skill imitation, not real skill questions. (SL1 – excerpt 35)

They lack many teachers, especially English teachers in difficult areas as teachers prefer working in cities and advantageous areas ... It's hard to conduct speaking test as required ... Available [audio] sources don't match the requirements relating to standard pronunciation and naturalness. (SL2 – excerpt 36)

In practice, it is the teachers who are responsible for implementing the policies. If their competence does not align with the new requirements of teaching and assessment activities, it becomes challenging to put the key policies into effect. The competence can encompass language competence and teaching and assessment skills. This may explain why the interviewees from the Primary Education Department and British Council emphasized the disconnect between the curriculum and assessment activities, and between policies and practices in general.

... teachers find it very hard and confused in conducting speaking tests for students. They may have been trained in in-service training workshop about how to do it; however, when it comes to the reality, it matters them due to the number of students and the assigned time, for example. (SL2 – excerpt 37)

I think there's still a bit of a disconnect between the policies that kind of a national level and implementation at the school level ... We

still have that disconnect between the curriculum and the textbooks on one side and the testing system. (SL5 – excerpt 38)

This issue appears to be more pronounced in schools and educational institutions in the public sector, particularly those located in rural or remote areas. Since they heavily rely on state funding, they have limited financial resources to enact desirable changes. Besides, the rigid time frames allocated for English teaching in the curriculum make them less flexible in carrying out various assessment activities. On the other hand, schools and educational institutions in the private sector and in urban or developed areas enjoy greater financial and time resources, which provides more favorable conditions for adhering to key policies (excerpts 17 and 18).

Another obstacle stemming from the micro context is teachers' reluctance to change their teaching and assessment practices, which is a point agreed upon by Wang (2008). Both specialists from MOET and the leader of a lower-secondary school referred to teachers' hesitation as a significant hurdle (excerpts 15 and 16). This reluctance is, in part, a result of the working conditions in which teachers find themselves. If teachers receive adequate support from the responsible parties and their schools, and if their students and their parents express a willingness to embrace change, it is likely that teachers are more likely to be open to change and invest their efforts in making the necessary adjustments.

... teachers are influenced by the DOETs, by the principals, also by their students and more broadly by the parents of the students they're working with as well. Again, if you think about all those influences on teachers' behavior, methodology, and everything that goes with. (SL5 – excerpt 39)

The micro context significantly impacts the macro context. When the micro context provides favorable conditions, key policies can be smoothly and effectively implemented. Such conditions mainly include sufficient financial resources,

qualified and willing-to-change human resources, and approval from other stakeholders like learners and their parents. In contrast, if the micro context lacks the necessary conditions, it can have a negative effect on the macro context by hindering the implementation of key policies. This can occur when schools and educational institutions lack adequate financial resources, professional resources, teacher competence, and assessment knowledge to meet the requirements. Additionally, it can happen when students and their families do not support the teachers. In such cases, key policies may not bring about desirable changes.

4.3 Influences of the Interplay between the Macro and Micro Contexts on the Stakeholders

In the education field, the key stakeholders include teachers, learners, managers of educational institutions, and policymakers. Data from the present study signal that the interacting contexts influence the two stakeholders – teachers and policymakers.

4.3.1 Direct influences on teachers and policymakers

On the one hand, teachers, an element in the micro context specified in the current study, receive great benefits when the macro and micro contexts have a supportive relationship. Joining training courses offered by MOET and DOETs, teachers have become more familiar with some assessment concepts and frameworks of reference (i.e., CEFR and CEFR-VN).

In recent training sessions for English teachers or textbook training sessions, we hear more people say this textbook is for B2-level students or for B1-level students. When people say much that way, the teachers may be more aware of what words/ phrases are B2 and what are B1 and that a certain word/ phrase should not be put in a certain context/ position ... I see that they have recently organized a lot of training on that, giving teachers a clearer awareness of determining the students' ability or the lesson objectives. (SL4 – excerpt 40)

... we [the university members in charge] have used those application, description, descriptors, etc. and try to translate them into particular practices in the different kind of tests, in different cultures or courses and even we used to use the format of CEFR to design the test for measuring the students' outcome in terms of language proficiency. (SL3 – excerpt 41)

From my training experience, over the last few years, teachers, practicing teachers, English language speakers are much more familiar with some of the concepts of formative assessment, assessment for learning as well as they know about traditional tests, or assessment of learning ... (SL5 – excerpt 42)

... Some of them do concern about how to create content like test items, test banks for themselves at various levels, primary through upper secondary. So again, awareness has been raised about the variety of assessment techniques, formative and summative, assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and everything in between. (SL5 – excerpt 43)

The teachers' awareness and competence improvement in turn creates considerable changes in their everyday teaching practices.

The change in assessment focuses on the development of language competence and qualities for students, which clearly refers to the entire teaching process of teachers ... I see it has a huge impact, not to mention the output results, but the learning atmosphere and teaching methods of teachers have also changed a lot. (SL2 – excerpt 44)

On the other hand, stakeholders in the macro context, that is, policymakers and responsible parties (MOET and DOETs) have to face certain challenges brought by the micro context, as aforementioned. Teachers' competence, as an element of the micro context, is undoubtedly the key to the improvement in English

language assessment activities, as agreed by Shulman and Shulman (2004), and Wang (2008). MOET and DOETs have already organized numerous training courses and created certain positive influences on the micro context. However, due to the varying competencies of teachers within different educational institutions, the implementation of the macro context has been negatively impacted. Particularly, teacher training and re-training courses, even when provided, have not yielded the desirable outcomes (excerpts 37, 38, and 39). Thus, the responsible parties must offer further support that is better aligned with the diverse real-world situations.

In sum, the research findings reveal that both teachers and policymakers gain benefits and face challenges when the macro and micro contexts intersect. Lessons for successful policy implementation have been identified by the stakeholders, drawn from the benefits and challenges that teachers and policymakers have constantly faced.

4.3.2 Lessons for Successful Policy Implementation

In the study, both the MOET's specialist and the university's leader emphasized the requirement for the appropriateness.

The training should be easy to understand and specific for teachers ... It should provide exactly what the teachers need, what they lack, and what difficulties they encounter. That would help to increase the inner strength and inner motivation for teachers. (SL2 – excerpt 45)

Training should be focused on what teacher are expected to perform and adjusted to fit different levels ... Training and re-training must be user-friendly, usable to teachers as well as in a more simplified way with less technical vocabulary. (SL3 – excerpt 46)

These insights about Vietnam have implications for other national education systems, illustrating that the interplay between the macro and micro contexts can

exert influences on elements of both layers of context in opposite directions. In order to address negative aspects of these influences, valuable and sustainable support, such as open learning resources, online toolkits, and shared space for discussion or communities of practice should be given due consideration. The more resources are provided to support the policy implementation effectively at the macro level, the greater willingness is likely to be observed at the institutional level, both from managers and teachers. In turn, these stakeholders, as key elements of the micro context, can drive significant changes, contributing to the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Enrichment seminars, conferences, and workshops [on how to implement the policies] need to be provided for both teachers and administrative staff ... Both formal (e.g., seminars and conferences) and informal (e.g., online forum with the presence of field experts) support for teachers should be promoted ... Communities of practice with big resources, commitment, energy, and time should be available for teachers to participate in. (SL1 – excerpt 47)

An online community of practice with support from professional members should be opened to boost teacher learning and practice in assessment ... A toolkit for managers (i.e., the bridge between those who issue the policies and those who implement the policies) should be considered for better guidelines and managements. (SL4 – excerpt 48)

When flexibility is not feasible, and standardization is necessary, it becomes essential to create favorable conditions and establish suitable procedures tailored to different micro contexts. This procedure may demand a significant amount of time and effort and necessitate willingness and cooperation from schools and educational institutions.

Everyone needs time to get familiar with the new methods, the new ways of thinking, especially when not only teachers and students but also parents are stakeholders ... The introduction of the policies

should be digitalized while the guidelines on how they should be implemented should be in detail and more practical. (SL4 – excerpt 49)

As stressed by the specialist from British Council in the study, open dialogues about the changes and what they mean among stakeholders (including policymakers, managers, teachers, parents, and students) are important. These dialogues can help stakeholders in the education sector be clear about the target and be more willing to change. It was stated that “There needs to be more policy dialogues among key stakeholders across the country and across the sectors within ELT” (excerpt 50).

The interviewees’ suggestions reveal a requirement that is, instead of just imposing the policies or applying a common procedure in all contexts, policymakers and responsible parties are required to be more flexible and open. They need to be aware of the specific conditions of schools or educational institutions in order to provide them with appropriate guidelines, customized support, and matching procedures. The leader from a lower-secondary school did recommend these in the interview.

When there comes a requirement that the teachers need to change the assessment methods, what we need to do first is to make sure the teachers understand what it [a policy] is like and then provide guidelines and conditions for them to meet the requirement. (SL4 – excerpt 51)

Most of the teachers often associate guidelines with something compulsory; that’s the reason why school managers and the head of the division need to interpret the policies in the way in which the policies are surely implemented but appropriately for the specific context. (SL4 – excerpt 52)

All in all, policymakers and responsible parties need to be flexible and aware of the variety in the micro context of schools and educational institutions. Besides, clear guidelines need to be provided, and procedure probably needs to be adapted appropriately. This lesson supports Wang (2008)'s idea about adequate guidance from the macro level. Being adequate, in the present study, means being clear, open, flexible, and specific to certain micro contexts.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Within the scope of this paper, the authors only presented and analyzed data from the interviews with five key stakeholders. However, this study is part of a research project on English language assessment practice in Vietnam. Besides conducting interviews, data were collected from English language teachers at different levels and areas by means of various data collection tools including a large-scale survey questionnaire, class observation, and focus group discussion. These sources of information can be analyzed in other papers to strengthen the arguments and inform the comprehensive landscape of English language assessment practice in Vietnam. Additionally, given that literature on the interface between the macro and micro contexts in the field of English language assessment is still limited, it is recommended that more studies on this issue be conducted so that more in-depth discussion on such an interaction and its effect can be held to facilitate better policy implementation.

6. Conclusion

The understanding of the context and the interface among its factors is essential in the process of innovating the national education system including English language assessment practice. The study found that the macro and micro layers of the context can interplay in both positive and negative ways. Specifically, the macro context has improved the conditions of the micro context whereas the micro context has created both promotion and barriers for the macro context depending on its specific features. Under the effects of these interacting contexts,

the stakeholders have experienced great influences. On the one hand, teachers, as an element in the micro context, become the main beneficiaries as their competence has improved considerably. On the other hand, those in the macro context like policymakers and responsible parties are facing great challenges when they need to ensure the successful implementation of key policies. It was learned from the study that to achieve the expected changes, flexible procedures must be established to adapt to various micro contexts. Besides, customized and appropriate support should be provided to teachers at different levels and sectors. In other words, only if the two layers support each other in both directions, and all stakeholders make a joint effort, can the ultimate goal of education innovation be attained. It is expected that these insights of the cases in Vietnam may be of use for other education contexts in Asian countries, especially where the education system is decentralized, and English is an important subject in the national curriculum.

7. About the Author

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11. Appendix: Interview Protocol

Policies for English Assessments

- Could you tell us about the key policies in assessing English Vietnam currently?
- Could you tell us about the adoption and adaptation of the CEFR in Vietnam's context?

Policies' Implementation in State Schools

- Could you please let me know in what ways and to what extent schools are able to implement the policies?
- What do you consider important for the policies to be successfully implemented?
- What are positive impacts that the policies have created?
- What challenges are there to overcome when implementing the policies?
- In what ways are the policies translated into practice, in terms of PD training and support to schools and teachers?

Policies' Implementation in Private Schools

- Could you please let me know in what ways and to what extent schools are able to implement the policies?
- What do you consider important for the policies to be successfully implemented?
- What are positive impacts that the policies have created?
- What challenges are there to overcome when implementing the policies?

- In what ways are the policies translated into practice, in terms of PD training and support to schools and teachers?

Recommendations for the Toolkit/Community of Practice

- We will be creating a toolkit and community of practices to support teachers with English assessment practices. What recommendations would you like to make?