



Original Article

# Vietnamese High-school English Teachers' Competence and Difficulties in Doing Action Research

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**Abstract:** This study examines Vietnamese high-school teachers' research competence and research difficulties in action research. Using a questionnaire (70 items,  $\alpha = 0.809$ ) and follow-up semi-structured interviews, the researchers confirmed that the top-rated competencies aligned with the traditional roles of high school English teachers, including giving feedback, using visual aids for presentations, and self-assessment. However, teachers were least confident in their research skills and techniques. Thematic analysis complemented the quantitative data, ascribing the underdeveloped research capacity to a lack of guidelines, motivation, and resources. Consequently, the practice of Action research might be improved with the cultivation of a teacher research culture and other incentives.

**Keywords:** Action research; research competencies; high school English teachers; research difficulties.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to the Study

Action research is viewed as an empowering form of academic inquiry for teachers of English as a Foreign Language because it strengthens the theory-practice linkage, improves the quality of language instruction, and ultimately serves as a form of continuous professional development [1-6], Action research broadens their understanding of

students, classroom problems, and themselves, thereby enhancing instruction standards [7]. Therefore, active research engagement has been put among the diverse responsibilities modern English as a Foreign Language teachers have to take [1, 8].

In Vietnam, the frame of high-school language teacher competence [9] recognizes the ability to “*keep abreast of current knowledge and conduct relevant research*” (pp. 2) as a part of promoting teaching values and professionalism. This addition is based on the assumption that regular practice of Action research would help English as a Foreign Language teachers transcend their role from passive consumers of knowledge to critical

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evaluators of teaching resources. The demonstration of such competency is shown through. However, despite its attention in theory and practice, the present understanding of Action research among Vietnamese high school teachers is limited. This study, thus, attempts to explore the competencies involved in doing Action research and the difficulties Vietnamese high school English teachers might encounter during the process.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

Although previous studies have examined teacher research from multiple perspectives, few looked into the specific competencies required for conducting Action research and the proficiency levels at which high school English teachers can command these competencies. Additionally, it is not clear the impediments to high school English as a Foreign Language teachers' conduct of Action research, especially in the Asian context. The current project, thus, is an attempt at examining the two important aspects of Action research, competencies, and challenges, with the participants being high school English as a Foreign Language teachers in Vietnam, using a mixed-methods approach. The guiding research questions are:

i) *How do Vietnamese high school English as a Foreign Language teachers self-assess their competence in conducting action research?*

ii) *What obstacles do Vietnamese high school English as a Foreign Language teachers face in conducting action research?*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Vietnamese High School English as a Foreign Language Teachers and Action Research

Action research is a form of academic inquiry that revolves around two primary actions: *involving* and *improving* [10]. Simply put, teachers' *involvement* in the cyclical phases of planning, acting, and reflecting helps them *improve* the understanding of the teaching practices, the students, and themselves [10].

Due to similarity in conceptualization across disciplines, the terms Action research and teacher research are often used interchangeably in educational research. However, teacher research, by definition, includes all forms of practitioner inquiry; from systematic, purposeful, and self-critical inquiry into one's work in K-12, higher education, or continuing education classrooms, schools, programs, and other formal educational contexts [11]. Following this definition, the researchers consider educational Action research a strand of teacher research. Consequently, insights into small-scale projects like this could contribute to understanding teacher research as an overarching discipline.

When conceptualizing Action research, it is worth discussing the topic of the publication. All educational research is, by definition, is "systematic inquiry made public" [12], its objective being the development of thoughtful reflection in order to strengthen the professional judgment of teachers [13]. Crookes [14] went further to assert that "research is not research unless communicated" (pp. 137), emphasizing the need to share or publish academic inquiries by the researchers depending on the purpose. Beyond the scope of educational decision-making, generation of knowledge, and washback effects on knowledge contexts [15], it is the right and responsibility of the language teachers to "contribute to discussions and debates in the field of language education" through the means of research [16]. Teacher research boasts a variety of manners of publication, from oral and written reports, formal or less formal, to formative or summative accounts [17]. Then, it is reasonable to deduce that the publication of Action research, while being an integral element, does not confine itself to formal platforms such as international journals or conferences.

Aga [18] claims that Action research can be characterized by several distinctive virtues, namely "empowerment of participants, self-reflective practice, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge, change orientation, a critical dimension involving

reflection on practices and social milieus that surround classrooms, context-specific, and a continuous cyclical or spiral process” (pp. 2). In Vietnam, similar virtues can be found in a movement called *Sáng kiến kinh nghiệm* (Innovation from Experience, hereafter: IFE), where teachers report on their applications of novel ideas in educational management and instructional techniques [19]. Like Action research, IFE projects (1) focus on an issue in practice, (2) take roots in a willingness of teachers to introduce changes, (3) stem from teachers localizing educational issues to their practice, and (4) involve both qualitative and quantitative design as the basis for investigative cycles [15, 20-23]. Nonetheless, carved out of teachers’ intuitive and anecdotal experience, IFE projects are often wanting in originality and critical reasoning, sound data analysis, and theorization of method choices, and thus IFEs lack adherence to the academic norms. This view seems to be supported by Le’s [24] claim that Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language teachers are not equipped with the “appropriate understanding, knowledge, or practical skills” to perform research (pp. 116).

## 2.2. Teachers’ Research Competence in Action Research

The term *research competence* is commonly used to address research skills and the ability to exercise these skills in carrying out research activities. It can be conceptualized into a three-dimensional model, comprising knowledge, skill, and attitude, although the distinction among these dimensions might be elusive [25-27].

Alongside this interpretation, researchers also break down research competence into capacities in specific areas. Examining the academic skills of 64 doctoral candidates in Latvia, Olehnovica et al., [28] classified research competencies into informative competencies, communicative competencies, and instrumental competencies. They viewed research in its core activities - to think, feel, and act. Potolea [29] introduced a construct of research competencies with specific behavior

descriptors based on another triadic expression of competence, essentially covering similar skill sets. These models appropriately fractionate research into areas of competencies, such as critical and constructive reflection [29] or instrumental competencies [28] making the self-assessment intelligible to the participants. However, to a certain extent, these categorizations shift the focus from research skills to transferable skills. Moreover, these break-downs of research skills necessitate a high degree of expert knowledge, the technicalities of which could be unfamiliar to the target population of the current study.

Besides the construct issues, validating a model for appraising research competence is another elusive task fettered by the lack of tools for effectiveness measurement [30]. Arguably, the comprehensive evaluation of research competency necessitates more than simply a finalized report. Although research papers might reflect the quality of argumentative and academic writing, they reveal little about the research processes’ critical reasoning and reflective practice. In this sense, a more holistic approach might substantiate judgment about research. Several studies were conducted following a positivist approach where research engagement and its washback effect were scrutinized [24, 31] In these studies, reflection papers, field notes, and interview transcription usually provide the empirical data for analysis.

Yayli [31] collaborated with four Turkish in-service English teachers in an Action research project as part of their Master’s degree program. With clear instruction and constructive feedback throughout the process, the teachers generally formed a positive attitude and improved confidence in their research skills, despite having doubts about their data analysis skills. In the same vein, Toquero [32] investigated 133 preservice teachers after a teacher education program in the Philippines. Similarly, teacher-trainees reported the development of critical thinking skills, information competencies, and educational competencies, affirming overall enhancement in pedagogical capacity. In Vietnam, Le [24]

observed closely how an Action research training project shaped the aptitude and attitude of 33 English as a Foreign Language teachers regarding teacher research. After the training modules, teachers reported higher confidence levels in teaching and research skills, deeper connections with students, and a willingness to become more research-engaged. Although thorough in utilizing qualitative design with observation, feedback sessions, and follow-up interviews, this study does not offer generalizability and data comprehensiveness due to the small sample size.

Overall, the studies discussed above adopted a thematic trajectory, at the end of which teachers came to be aware of their potential for research, abandoned previous reservations about the practice, and indicated readiness for future inquiries. However, even from this perspective, the growth in research competencies is usually self-proclaimed, and little is known about whether the interventions brought genuine improvement or merely experiential knowledge. In essence, the subject of baseline research competence (i.e., whether or not they possess the threshold competence for research, where their strengths and weaknesses lie, etc.) is still a blurred picture. On top of the looseness in competency categorization (i.e., informative, educational, technological, etc.), a lack of quantitative data also hampers this understanding.

In a study in 2007, Bromley et al., [33] quantitatively evaluated research competencies of 201 postgraduates in England. Doctoral competencies, most of which are related to doing research, are compartmentalized into seven skill areas: *Research skills and techniques*, *Research environment*, *Personal effectiveness*, *Communicative skills*, *Networking and Team-working*, and *Career management*, according to the Joint Skills Statement [34]. Collective self-assessments of 36 specific research skills showed that postgraduates were most confident in Personal effectiveness skills and Research management skills and that Research skills and techniques and Communication skills were areas to be

considered for future training. Since the surveys were administered to postgraduates, the scale was built upon understanding how well Ph.D. students of different academic levels (first-degree graduate, little experience, experienced, particularly abled) could perform the competency. Regardless, the perception of these levels might have differed among participants, leading to incongruent assessments. Additionally, in some of the competencies, two or more behavior descriptors were used to depict one competency, affecting the overall clarity.

After careful analysis of the available approaches to investigating Action research competencies and factors hampering them, we decided to follow the approach of Bromley et al., [34] selectively. Details about the amendments we made will be elaborated on in the Method section.

### 2.3. Teachers' Research Difficulties in Action Research

Reviewing the constraints on teacher research, Borg [17] summed up the eight conditions unfavorable to Action research: non-collaborative school culture, limitations in teachers' awareness, beliefs, skills, and knowledge, limited resources, demotivators, economic matters, leadership attributes, and political issues. Aga's [18] study on motivating and demoralizing conditions for Action research projects employed a triangulation of data sources, including questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and focus group discussions. Analysis of data from 58 Ethiopian university lecturers revealed that classroom problems want research opportunities, and financial and promotion incentives were among the rare occurrences of Action research stimulants. In contrast, unfavorable settings were more complex, ranging from a mismatch between effort and rewards to lengthy procedures in procuring funding. The research difficulties pointed out in Yayli's [31] study were more technical. Particularly, the four in-service teachers admitted that qualitative data and analysis and interpretation were areas they struggled with the most, and a supervisor-

mentee power imbalance was unfavorable for their development of Action research. The difficulties experienced by Vietnamese teachers were found to be more bureaucratic. For example, in her interview-based research on 11 university English instructors, Vu [35] reveals that preoccupation with teaching duties renders any interest in research tasks from the Vietnamese teachers unrealized. The recurrent view that they were not competent in research discouraged English as a Foreign Language teachers from research. To summarize this paragraph on teachers' difficulties in doing Action research, it would be apt to cite Aga's [18] statement that teachers may fail to reap the benefits attributed to Action research theoretically due to certain factors, ranging "from policy to practice, internal to external, and individual to institutional" (pp. 1).

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

Quantitative data were collected from a non-probability sample of 105 English as a Foreign Language teachers of English (96 females and nine males) at high schools in Vietnam. All the participating teachers had been in service for four to fifteen years at the time, and they all had either research experiences or IFE experiences. Among those responders, eight agreed to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Regarding ethical issues, all the participants were well-informed about the purposes of the study and were addressed by pseudonyms whenever they were referred to in this paper.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Focus group discussions

The current study employed a sequential explanatory multi-method design [36]. Firstly, four English as a Foreign Language teachers (two in-service teachers from a specialized high school, one head of English division from a high school, and one language teacher with experience in Action research) participated in the focus group discussion. The four teachers

shared their Action research experience in the upper-secondary education context (i.e., whether their participation was forced or voluntary; which part of conducting research they found most smooth and why; where they encountered technical or logistical problems; how the practice of teacher research was reinforced in their institutions; etc.). The facilitator moderated the discussion by probing the answers, preventing digression, and summarizing the main arguments. The discussion lasted approximately an hour. The teachers neither objected to nor added other challenges to the list but differed on a few behavioral indicators of research competencies. As a result, attention was paid to analyzing item-total statistics for these particular items.

##### 3.2.2. Questionnaires

The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part contains questions on participants' personal and educational backgrounds. Second, there are items to collect data on English as a Foreign Language teachers' perceptions of their action research competence, adapted from a competence questionnaire by [33], with changes in the content. Specifically, the removal of *the research environment* and *career management* aligned with the restriction of Action research to classroom vicinity. In addition, certain competency statements were rephrased to clarify the action manifesting each competency after piloting. The researchers decided to keep the original titles of competency groups as they are in the Joint Statements of Skills [37] (i.e., A = *research skills & techniques*). In total, there are 45 items, which were written in can-do statements, on a six-point semantic differential scale of competence (See *Appendix*). In the final section, there are items on difficulties in conducting Action research, which require the responders to rate on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Content for this part was adapted from [17] summary of the challenges to teacher research, although items about *Leadership* and *Political issues* were removed due to concerns about

“face” in Vietnamese culture [38] and social desirability bias [39].

We pilot-tested this questionnaire with the focus group and edited it for clarity before conducting the official survey. Levels of internal consistency for all parts of the questionnaire were checked, and analysis of Item-Total statistics suggested that removing any item would result in a lower Cronbach’s Alpha (Table 1).

3.2.3 Interview

After analyzing data from the questionnaires, we interviewed eight teachers who indicated a willingness for follow-up semi-structured interviews. Six interviewees worked in public schools while the other two worked in private ones. Those teachers were asked to elaborate on their questionnaire responses during face-to-face interviews. For instance, they were asked to explain why certain

conditions were and were not conducive to their conduct of Action research and to comment on their interpretation of the obstacles (such as ‘lack of institutional support’) which they had indicated in the survey. Each interview session lasted from 20 to 40 minutes and was recorded. Teachers were able to discuss relevant matters in the order they appeared in the questionnaire.

We employed a deductive approach to thematic analysis [40] to analyze the qualitative data. The data analysis procedure commenced with the transcription of the interviews. Second, to prepare the dataset for analysis, we read through the transcripts to get an overview. Third, the data were coded concerning themes from the literature review, and these codes were checked by an external expert. The resulting categories and sub-categories complemented the quantitative analysis of questionnaire sections.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics for Research Competence Evaluation Items

Section	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
AR competence	0.829	0.801	45
Difficulties in AR	0.805	0.793	25

(The final version of the questionnaire was administered in Vietnamese).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Vietnamese High School English as a Foreign Language Teachers’ Research Competence in Action Research

Figure 1 shows that ratings at *novice* and *intermediate* account for a major section of the pie chart (55.3% accumulative). Interestingly,

fewer and fewer teachers described their competencies as *advanced*, *superior*, or *expert*, and merely 2.1% of the responses indicated an expertise in any competency.

The mean score of the overall self-assessment of participants’ Action research competence is 2.83 (SD = 1.25), which is nearly *intermediate*.

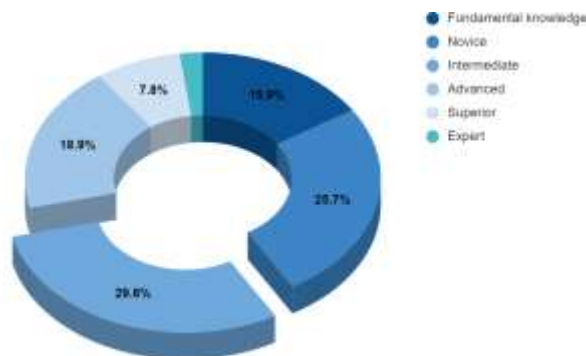


Figure 1. Percentages of 101 participants’ answers to 45 competency items.

Table 4 presents high school English as a Foreign Language teachers' self-assessment of groups of competency. In general, they rated themselves most highly in *personal effectiveness* competencies at *mid-intermediate* ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), and this is followed by *teams/networking* with minimal difference ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). The remaining skill sets fall into the category of *novice*. The lowest ratings were given to *research skills and techniques* at *low-novice* ( $M = 2.40$ ) with small variations ( $SD = 1.04$ ). Lastly, teachers' *communication skills* and *research management* competencies have similar mean scores ( $M = 2.92$  &  $M = 2.93$ , respectively). It is noteworthy that the difference between the highest and lowest group means was 1.16 – higher than one scale.

Table 4. Summary of self-assessed skill sets (descending order of means)

Skillset	Means	SD
Personal effectiveness	3.56	1.13
Teams/Networking	3.36	1.45
Research management	2.93	1.04
Communication skills	2.92	1.35
Research skills and techniques	2.40	1.04

As illustrated in Table 5, among the ten top-rated competencies, chi-square calculations confirm seven competencies whose ratings were significantly higher than expected from the overall data set. Individually, the highest-rated competency of the whole set is *awareness of feedback techniques* with  $M = 4.48$   $SD = 0.83$ . Teachers indicated they could *use slides for oral presentation* ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) and *self-evaluate skills during the research* ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) to solve problems of higher complexity. Concurrently, the ability to *define areas for improvement from self-evaluation* ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) was generally indicated to be well above

*Intermediate*. Regarding academic writing, English as a Foreign Language teachers largely claimed that their *control over various written styles* ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) was sufficient, although specialist help might be required from time to time. In addition, *working independently without supervision* ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) and *collaboratively on complex projects* ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) were also identified as areas where the participants were more assured of than average. Notably, four out of ten highest rated competencies, including the highest overall, belonged to the competency group *teams/networking*.

The means of the ten lowest-rated competencies range from *mid-fundamental knowledge* to *novice*. Strikingly, *research skills and techniques* competencies comprise seven out of ten from this lowest-rated list, indicating that English as a Foreign Language teachers were not adept at this domain. Specifically, over half of the English as a Foreign Language teachers (52%) believed that their ability to *identify research problems from research gaps* did not exceed fundamental knowledge ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ). According to the teachers, methodological awareness, as shown through the capacity to *be aware of research techniques and their applications* ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) and *prioritize among a range of methodologies* ( $M = 1.60$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ), was also underdeveloped. Additionally, teachers lacked practical experience in *providing innovative research ideas* ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), which might be related to the low ratings in the *formulated hypotheses and/or research questions* ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) competency. Concerning critical literature review ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), English as a Foreign Language teachers were inclined to describe this competency at *novice* (35.3%) or *fundamental knowledge* (42.2%). As for their participation in academic gatherings, teachers reported limited *attendance at research conferences and meetings* ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and scant *awareness of procedure regarding article submission and defense* ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). At

the same time, there was a general lack of practice among teachers regarding the ability to *present research work at seminars and conferences* ( $M = 1.99, SD = 0.71$ ).

The findings revealed that the participants rated their research competencies fairly low and were more confident of certain skill groups than others. Specifically, *personal effectiveness*, comprising attributes conducive to productivity in research, was rated highest, while *research skills and techniques* turned out to be an area in which the participants lacked confidence. As noted by several researchers [41-43], high

school teachers are generally not exposed to and tasked with research duties, which impedes their growth in *research techniques* competencies. According to [44], high school teachers do research more commonly as a requirement in MA programs rather than as self-initiated academic inquiry. However, outside of this convention, they rarely engage in well-structured academic research, which results in the generally low quality of research initiatives known as IFEs discussed in the Literature Review.

Table 5. Summary of self-assessed competencies for the overall data set

Competencies	Group*	Chi-square	Sig.	Means	SD
<i>Top-rated competencies</i>					
Be aware of feedback techniques	E	35.02	p<0.0005	4.48	0.83
Use slides for oral presentation	C	36.47	p<0.0005	4.39	1.46
Self-evaluate skills during research	D	39.47	p<0.0005	4.13	1.00
Be aware of other teammates	E	6.92	0.140	3.83	1.34
Solve teamwork problems	E	8.78	0.07	3.82	1.33
Plan for research project	B	5.71	0.06	3.81	0.78
Define areas for improvement from self-evaluation	D	53.00	p<0.0005	3.74	0.96
Exert control over variety of written styles	C	56.94	p<0.0005	3.72	1.16
Work independently without supervision	D	23.16	p<0.0005	3.68	1.24
Work collaboratively on complex projects	E	38.24	p<0.0005	3.59	1.25
<i>Bottom-rated competencies</i>					
Present research work at seminars and conference	C	12.77	0.002	1.99	0.71
Communicate about research topics to peers and supervisors	A	7.47	0.024	1.99	0.74
Provide innovative research ideas	A	1.12	0.57	1.92	0.81
Be aware of procedure regarding article submission and defense	C	36.71	p<0.0005	1.88	0.62
Criticize published research	A	6.06	0.048	1.87	0.75
Attend research conferences and meetings regularly	E	145.88	p<0.0005	1.85	1.32
Be aware of research techniques and their applications	A	16.41	p<0.0005	1.79	0.69
Formulate hypotheses and/or research questions	A	24.06	p<0.0005	1.70	0.66
Prioritize among a range of methodologies	A	25.82	p<0.0005	1.60	0.68
Define research problems from research gaps	A	36.06	p<0.0005	1.54	0.61

\*A, Research skills and techniques; B, Research management;  
C, Communication skills; D, Personal effectiveness; E, Team/Networking skills.



Data analysis of the current project also indicated that high school English as a Foreign Language teachers largely identified *research skills and techniques* as the weakest. Quantitative data pointed out that teachers were unsure of their *discipline methodologies, original critical thinking, and problem-solving skills*. This finding is similar to that of Gilmore and Feldon [45], who found methodological knowledge lacking among both teachers and teaching graduate students. The most likely explanation is that Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language teachers have a generally low rate of research engagement [24, 46], where most teacher research projects are ideological rather than empirically-based, with a penchant for the descriptive approach to education policy analysis [24, 47]. This revelation might not come as a surprise since Action research was not incorporated into the professional development agenda for English as a Foreign Language teachers until 2008 [48]. Despite repeated measures to stimulate a culture of teacher research, most English as a Foreign Language teachers suffer from a deficit in classroom-based research techniques and procedures regarding data analysis [49]. In a broader sense, the insufficiency in action research competence might indicate an absence of the teacher research culture [1, 24].

Of particular interest is how the participants in this study felt more assured of transferrable, non-research-exclusive competencies, such as *working autonomously* or *public speaking* than competencies directly related to research, such as *defining research problems* and *criticizing published research*. This phenomenon might be explained by how *managerial, communicational, and teamwork skills* are transferrable, and these competencies might have been developed from previous working experiences other than research [50, 51]. Insofar that frequent application facilitates skill improvement, we may argue that the ratings for certain competencies reflect the high school teachers' responsibilities in their jobs. The cornucopia of feedback delivered in language

classrooms [52-54], for instance, might have sharpened their command of giving feedback. Similarly, group assignments - as in field assignments, collaborative teaching, or syllabus development [55] - may have contributed to teachers' development in cooperation skills. Similarly, the ICT movement promoted by the MOET in the past decade, which aims to further teachers' IT proficiency in language instruction [46, 48], could explain the high ratings for *IT for oral presentations*. Arguably, teachers found themselves adept in these competencies - integral capacities of a high school teacher [9] - thanks to the explicit emphasis on skill development and repeated engagement as part of their job description. This association, in turn, raises the question about what an active focus on Action research competencies in training might engender.

#### 4.2. Vietnamese High School English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Research Difficulties in Action Research

The third section of the questionnaire includes 25 items describing conditions that might inhibit research practice according to studies, and the participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with each of them. To gain deeper insight, we focused on the ten challenges that the English teachers generally agreed on, which were summed up in Table 6 in descending order of means. In analyzing these items, we would be drawing on pertinent interview data that shed light on teachers' opinions.

Table 6 shows that most teachers were discouraged from doing Action research by the obscurity in institutional regulations regarding teacher research practice ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ). This obscurity can be interpreted as a source of confusion about how teachers' research interests might be aligned with institutions' interests and regulations. For example, interviewees A, B, and D shared:

The policies are unclear. I do not know if I am allowed to do it. (Interview with Teacher A, 2021).

Table 6. Highest-rated Challenges to High school English as a Foreign Language Teachers in conducting Action research (descending order of means)

Challenge to conducting Action research.	Categories	Means	SD
Institutions do not clear directions/structure to guide teacher research.	Support from institution	4.37	0.70
Teachers are concerned that doing and sharing research will make instructional “problems” public.	Motivation	4.36	0.69
Colleagues or managers do not acknowledge teachers' efforts.	Motivation	4.36	0.64
Teachers are only paid for “teaching” time.	Motivation	4.32	0.72
Teachers lack a good reason to do research.	Motivation	4.25	0.71
There are few rewards to them being research-engaged.	Motivation	4.25	0.67
Teachers are not given enough funds to support research.	Resources	4.24	0.71
Teachers do not have time to do research.	Resources	4.15	0.71
Teachers have little access to expert support to do research.	Resources	4.14	0.81
Teachers do not receive assistance from colleagues and students.	Support from institution	3.75	1.03

(Support from institution)

There is too little information about participating in research, joining actual researchers, forming teams, or leading our projects. (Interview with Teacher B, 2021).

I have not come across documents that say research work could account for working hours (Interview with Teacher D, 2021).

References to permission, procedural ambiguity, and contract limitations recurred in the interviews, and these factors were reported to contribute to teachers’ disinvolvement in Action research. In addition, such factors emerged strongly in certain comments, as one teacher expressed that they were afraid that they were not “allowed” to conduct research. At the same time, another envisioned that failure to categorize their research according to a predetermined school specification would lead to the research product being deemed “wasteful”.

The teacher participants also generally agreed that a lack of assistance from colleagues and students could pose challenges for the conduct of Action research ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). Follow-up interviews revealed that either

rejection could cause this problem to participate in research or researcher teachers’ hesitance to ask for help. Specifically, two of the interviewees pointed out that high school teachers took on many responsibilities apart from teaching, and thus, refusal to assist with such projects would be expected. However, most of the interviewed teachers attributed the unavailability of support to their reluctance to ask for help. As explained by Teacher F, colleagues’ involvement might entail a burdensome workload for those who were asked, and “we are not comfortable asking for a favor” (Interview with Teacher F, 2021). A younger teacher, four years in service, added that it was a matter of “interest” above all else and that the older teachers in their division showed a little penchant for extracurricular academic activities, “it was awkward to convince them to help out” (Interview with Teacher G, 2021).

#### **Motivation**

According to Table 6, several factors related to motivation had adverse effects on the practice of Action research. The concern that

research engagement might expose teaching problems was fairly common among teachers ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). There was a shared view that deviation from the traditional routine might appear as signs of a defect in teachers' instructional methods. As mentioned by one interviewee, if he/she found another doing research, he/she would be "wondering if there is a problem with the traditional way of teaching" (Interview with Teacher A, 2021). Teacher A also noted that this mindset was especially prevalent among older, more experienced teachers. In this sense, fear of judgment from colleagues was one of the reasons why high school teachers did not conduct research, which might be viewed as a matter of face.

Although different themes emerged, all eight interviewees shared similar views of the practical use of research when asked to elaborate on the phrase "a good reason to do research" ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). Teachers from public schools, in particular, found it hard to squeeze Action research alongside the entrenched focus on achieving high results at university entrance exams. Specifically, teachers D and C said:

I do not think it [doing research] matters, as long as the students pass the grades and ultimately the university entrance exams. (Interview with Teacher D, 2021)

Innovation is always encouraged, but an important goal is many university attendees. (Interview with Teacher C, 2021)

The current reward system at schools also shaped teachers' decision to join Action research movements ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). Here the financial rewards were explained as money from the IFE projects, which, according to three teachers, could only cover photocopying expenses. The interviewees said they might have been intrigued if there had been more significant promotion prospects or financial rewards in teacher research contests/platforms. Teacher C explicitly cited the mismatch between the effort poured into research work and the minimal gains he/she received: "When weighing against the amount of effort poured into a research project, the

small sum of money is not that enticing." (Interview with Teacher C, 2021). Most interviewees conceded that although they were primarily financially motivated, "there should at least be a proper, suitable reward" (Interview with Teacher C, 2021).

*I am only paid for 'teaching' time* was ranked fourth in the top challenges for Vietnamese ESL teachers' research ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). This reason reflects the exclusion of doing research from job duties. According to some teachers, because they were under no binding contract to conduct research, their job descriptions simply did not entail such a duty. Teacher B linked payment and responsibility, asserting that he/she "was not bound to do research". Additionally, because there was a cultural disregard for Action research, teachers were not motivated to expend much effort into IFE either. Consequently, a lack of "stress" to write up a quality paper was non-existent since they did not intend to publish, according to Teacher E.

### Resources

As shown in Table 6, the surveyed teachers agreed that the practice of Action research was restricted by inadequacy in resources ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). Firstly, teachers were not given a sufficient budget, if any, to spend on research ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). When inquired, in particular, teachers from public schools maintained that asking for grants inside and outside of school was a foreign concept. Teacher F ascribed this to the fact that their school did not have "an official expenditure for teacher research" and that they were not familiar with the practice ("I do not remember one [an official expenditure for teacher research]"). The teachers from private institutions reported the same tendency, except for teacher E, who asserted that procuring funding for research projects was common in their institutions ("The head of the division will process the application for funding with a proposal"). However, this funding application would be lumped together with other extracurricular activities ("organizing teambuilding game or workshop") because

there was not a definitive quota for teacher research funding.

According to questionnaire responses, teachers who wanted to conduct Action research also had to overcome time constraints ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). The interviewees agreed that they could hardly balance extant responsibilities and research time: "With the teaching, lesson planning, grading, and other managerial and clerical duties, doing Action research seems like a luxury". (Interview with Teacher A, 2021). One participant commented on his experience, illustrating the long-term commitment associated with Action research that emanated from lack of time resources: "Once it took me two years to finally finish one project..." (Interview with Teacher E, 2021). Although teachers from public schools and private schools might be preoccupied with different extraneous tasks, they usually found themselves unable to set aside time for research.

Furthermore, teachers also reported that they would be deterred from conducting Action research if given little access to expert support ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). This result could be related to the fact that *I am not competent enough to conduct research* also received a high rating from the teachers ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). According to teacher A, without expert help to orient the research, they often "implemented the new idea right away" without systematically planning procedures or writing up a report for it. The matter of training workshops was discussed among the interviewees. Specifically, teachers from public schools usually received training programs that introduced them to new policies on updated test formats or workshops focusing on competencies, such as applying technologies in teaching. Largely missing from these occasions were modules that focused intensively on research skill development. The scope of content knowledge was wider for private school teachers, who reported that they were sent and sponsored to academic conferences.

Regarding the second research question, analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that general apathy towards a

teacher research culture was a principal obstacle to the establishment thereof. It is important to note that these challenges are not peculiar to the Vietnamese setting but may be found in other educational systems. During interviews, participants shared that the job description in their contract did not entail research duties. Underlying this notion could be a possible association between the sense of responsibility and payment [56]. To an extent, this suggests that teachers might be motivated by financial incentives, raising the question about the role which attractive incentives (i.e., financial rewards or promotion prospects) can play in promoting the teacher research culture. Research is being contrasted with the more conventional responsibilities that teachers are involved in, and the reluctance to engage in research here may have stemmed from the perception of research as not part of the job duties but rather, personal pursuits.

Additionally, one participant brought up the relevant matter of peer pressure as they pointed out how Action research practice could be out of place in institutions where most teachers did not engage in research. This tendency is also implied in [17, 57], where peer pressure, cultural beliefs, and facework impede the process of change during the national curriculum reform of China. For the Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language teachers, this might have been an issue of professional identity. In Vu's [35] study on lecturers who had research responsibilities wired into their job requirements, half of the tertiary educators reported disassociating themselves from the title *lecturer*, perceiving the work nature as teaching.

Furthermore, the negligence of research duties was exacerbated by the obscurity in instructions for Action research, whether research work could be counted towards working hours or if class hours could be used for experiments. Vietnamese teachers are generally known for strict heed to rules set by the authorities [58]; therefore, they might choose to refrain from the practice of Action research for fear of unknowingly violating institutional regulations. In a way, school

administrators did not factor in this type of information when devising relevant binding documents might imply a corresponding lack of regard for teachers' academic inquiries. Even in the *Vietnam English Teacher Competency Framework*, which guides developing English as a Foreign Language teachers' quality, the policy vaguely encourages teachers to be "practicing teachers with adaptive expertise" rather than specifies formal knowledge regarding theoretical base and teacher research [35, 68].

On motivation, results suggest that teachers see little practical value in engaging in the practice. Le [24] concedes that the current recognition of Action research achievement in Vietnam, translated into employment and promotion prospects, is not an effective stimulant for teacher participation in academic inquiries. Even when curriculum vitae are being processed for recruitment, hiring committees at Vietnamese high schools rarely look into previous research experience or prioritize candidates with such qualifications. This implicit dismissal of Action research is often defended based on high school graduation exams. However, another way of looking at this thought process is that the teachers do not believe in the effectiveness of Action research as a pedagogical tool, specifically the possibility that changing their practice could engender higher test results.

The lack of funding for teacher research in budget planning at private and public schools is also worth discussing. Interviewees from public schools mentioned a general unfamiliarity with procedures required for funding application, and those with the know-how of such a bureaucratic process were reluctant to follow it. Private school teachers pointed out that funding could be approved as long as proposals with needs for financial aids properly justified were submitted. However, securing funding for research involves multiple procedures and legitimizing actions, which might prematurely deaden the vigor for research. A similar argument might be found in Indonesia, where little information is available for teachers about

obtaining research grants or financial assistance [59], or Japan [60], where grants are highly valued competitive and rarely reserved for language teachers. The most popular kind of funding is usually sponsorship for PD programs or short training, but the focus of these programs is not solely developing research capacity. They are often devoted to developing the performance of traditional English as a Foreign Language teacher roles, such as course design, genre analysis techniques, or theory-into-practice training models [61]. This lack of focus seems to be a common problem, as most research training programs in Turkey [62], Malaysia [63], or Asia in general [64] do not seem to address the needs of teachers fully. Furthermore, contrary to higher learning institutions, where substantial financial incentives are being offered to lecturers with publications [65], Action research at high schools by high school English as a Foreign Language teachers do not pay well. Even for IFE awards, monetary reimbursements are minimal. Past studies have documented teachers' willingness to pay for learning resources (those which are often the school's responsibility) if they foresee gains in instruction quality [56]. Hence, failure to commit to Action research for financial reasons might then indicate teachers not perceiving Action research as integral to both their teaching practice and the progress of teacher education.

Teacher participants also emphasized the shortage of facilities and expert assistance in doing Action research. While the absence of free access to journals and department-held symposiums substantiates the argument about the negligence of Action research, teachers' grievance over inadequate specialist assistance might underscore their feeling of insecurity in research competence. The dearth of expert support is evident in how most IFEs - an Action research near-equivalent - are experiential and lack a concrete methodological basis. Furthermore, although teacher-research collaboration is a norm in English-speaking countries, such interactions are relatively scarce

in Vietnam. For the most part, teachers would play the role of informants, responding to questionnaires, interviews, or being observed, instead of taking academic control alongside professional researchers. In general, Vietnamese high school English as a Foreign Language teachers might only receive one-on-one expert advice while pursuing higher degrees or participate in experimental Action research training workshops similar to the design of previous research [24, 31]. Even then, there is a limit to the sustainability of these experiences [7].

In addition to the difficulties about institutional support and research culture, time strain was cited as an obstacle to high school English as a Foreign Language teachers' engagement in Action research. Teachers indicated that they had to perform additional duties, such as managing classrooms (fulfilling departmental duties and completing off-school workload) on top of core teacher responsibility - planning and delivering lessons. In a similar study in the Vietnamese context, English as a Foreign Language teachers even likened their workload to that of a "teaching machine" [35], and these duties have adversely affected their work-life balance. Therefore, adding research tasks to an already heavy workload seemed highly unreasonable. In nations where public schools primarily provide K-12 education, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, or Vietnam, teaching-related responsibilities are heavy enough without the requirement of [63, 66, 67]. Managing a research project, which involves excessive paperwork for research documentation [17, 69, 70], means that teachers would have to sacrifice their free time and risk disrupting their work-life balance.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Summary of Findings

Employing a mixed-methods design, this study provides deeper insight into Vietnamese high school English as a Foreign Language teachers' Action research competence and difficulties in conducting Action research. The

findings indicate that English as a Foreign Language teachers tended to give higher proficiency ratings to competencies that constitute their traditional role as a teacher. *Personal effectiveness* had the highest mean score rating, while *research skills and techniques* were the lowest. Particularly, teachers generally described *awareness of feedback techniques, use of slides for oral presentations, and self-evaluation of skills during research* as *advanced* and upwards. In contrast, teachers seemed to have acquired only *fundamental knowledge in formulating hypotheses and/or research questions, prioritizing a range of methodologies for a research question, and defining research problems from research gaps*.

Secondly, concerning obstacles to teacher research in high schools, teachers were most likely to agree that obscurity in guidelines on teacher research, fear of exposing their instructional problems, and lack of acknowledgment from peers and managers hindered their attempts at Action research. In other words, teachers had to confront problems in terms of institutional support, resources, and motivation during academic pursuits.

### 5.2. Implications

Although this study focused on English as a Foreign Language teachers' Action research competencies and difficulties, the findings may well have a bearing on accommodating the practice of Action research within high school contexts of similar educational systems. Explicitly, school administrators should provide English as a Foreign Language teachers with multiple forms of support for Action research, either in facility conditions [71-73] or expert support [71, 74]. The low ratings for *research skills and techniques* competencies signal a lack of practical experience in this area, and thus more attention should first be directed to instilling in English as a Foreign Language teachers a *drive* to become academically involved. Administrators can encourage this by sponsoring teachers to attend academic

gatherings or providing adequate training on the importance of Action research to teaching and teachers' professional development [17, 75]. The much-needed training programs need to be empirically based on comprehensive need analysis, catering for teachers of different research capacities. The current research provides an initial model for obtaining baseline information for such a purpose. Understanding how Action research can be an instrumental tool for effective instructions and better learning outcomes might promote English as a Foreign Language teachers' interest in this academic activity. Moreover, relevant research programs.

Secondly, although the forced practice of Action research is against its *self-initiated* and *voluntary* nature, a sense of obligation for teachers to do research might be pivotal initially [44]. Nguyen and Nguyen [76] suggest ordering teacher research projects to collaborate to handle the workload and balance personal schedules. Moreover, nurturing a community of active teacher-researchers entails sustainable collaboration between high schools and universities [7, 24, 77], or teacher-researcher projects, where research experts can help develop teachers' IFE projects into methodologically sound and academically-inclined studies. The assumption here is that although it might start as adherence to policies, progress in skills and a firsthand account of Action research benefits will gradually engage English as a Foreign Language teacher in research out of habit. However, it is noteworthy that the sustainability of such programs is partly contingent on financial support from the government [24, 78-79] and that a system of rewards should also be cultivated to promote awareness and participation in teacher research [1, 17].

Thirdly, to allow time for teacher research, school administrators can consider reducing the amount of paperwork or teaching hours. This request might be granted by extending English as a Foreign Language teachers' duties to include participation in training sessions,

academic workshops, and research work, and most importantly, the time spent on those research activities must be counted towards working hours. In other words, participating in research practices should be treated equally as teaching hours, not as an additional accompaniment. This contention leads to our final suggestion: assisting English teachers in their research should be done by establishing a clear-cut guideline from which the teaching staff can refer. In these documents, attention should be directed to research duty versus teaching duties, whether research can be done in class, or pay rate for research hours. Dialogues on such rights and responsibilities should be accessible and open during relevant meetings or conferences.

### 5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

Although much effort was put into the execution of this research project, there remain several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, since there is probably a gap between teachers' self-report and real capacity [80, 81], further research might consider triangulating data sources observations or testing to increase data objectivity. Secondly, the present study investigates teachers' capacity for Action research and the difficulties they encountered, but it does not cover insights into the forms of support for teacher Action research. More broadly, research is also needed to determine how actual policies are of assistance to the practice of teacher research and how effective they have been [1, 82]. Thirdly, a glimpse into qualitative data revealed a difference in research experience between public and private school teachers. Specifically, the disparity in operation could ultimately change teachers' perception of research and their engagement in practice [83]. A future study investigating such differences employing proportionate stratified sampling and inferential statistical analysis to examine teachers' perspectives quantitatively [84] would be very interesting.

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### Appendix

#### EXCERPT OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

##### PART 2: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ACTION RESEARCH COMPETENCE

1. *Fundamental knowledge*, understand basic concepts, in dire need of training and practical experience;
2. *Novice*, limited experience with practical application, expect to require help when perform this skill;
3. *Intermediate*, complete tasks in this competency as requested, require expert help time to time;
4. *Advanced*, perform actions associated with this skill without assistance, start to be tasked with problems of higher complexity;
5. *Superior*, strategic proficiency in this competency; can provide guidance, troubleshoot and answer questions related to this area;
6. *Expert*, create applications for and/or lead development of reference and resource materials for this competency; be tasked with providing education and training in this competency

From 1 to 6, how do you personally assess your overall competence to do action research

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
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From 1 to 6, how do you personally assess the following skills of action research:

1	Define research problem from a coherent analysis of gaps in existing knowledge base.
2	Identify areas where investigation might produce new knowledge.
3	Write a research proposal, describing research questions, context, sources and methodology to the level required of applications for postdoctoral work.
4	Formulate hypotheses and/or research questions for the purposes of designing a personal research project.
5	Provide new and innovative research ideas.
6	Criticize published research.
7	Communicate about their research topic with supervisor and peers.
8	Write a literature review of publication standards on the topic.
9	Discuss and prioritize a range of methodologies to address a research question.

10	Aware of and understand appropriate techniques and their application.
11	Objectively acknowledge weaknesses and assumptions in one's findings.
12	Apply the same objectivity to the work of others.
13	Understanding of appropriate methods for testing conjectures or tentative conclusions.
14	IT ability in data collection analysis and presentation in appropriate graphical form.
15	Verbally summarize a research problem succinctly to different audiences.
16	Objectively criticize own research and define future work.
17	Produce written summaries of a variety of lengths to suit the purpose.
18	Write progress reports on research of an appropriate professional standard.
19	Understand the procedure of submitting and defending own article.
20	Make plans to conduct research.
21	Balance competing demands on time.
22	Set and prioritize a number of intermediate goals within an individual research project.
23	Collect and record information in an organized and professional way.
24	Conduct searches using appropriate online and offline resources.
25	Demonstrate an awareness of potential sources of relevant information for the subject area.
26	Aware of referencing appropriate sources and use a variety of referencing styles and systems.
27	Work to a professional level without supervision.
28	Seimonstrate accuracy, organization and attention to detail.
29	Self-evaluate own skills during the conduct of research.
30	Define areas for improvement from self-evaluation.
31	Make and execute substantial research plans with guidance necessary only for specialist issues.
32	Produce a well-structured and well written report of substantial length.
33	Write concise, academic prose and express ideas with suitable clarity.
34	Control a variety of stylistic academic writing styles.
35	Use slides, OHPs and PowerPoint in oral presentations.
36	Write and present for their research subject of the kind expected in journals.
37	Present academic work at seminars and conferences.
38	Respond clearly and persuasively to questions and comments at such occasions.
39	Write and present research in an appropriate manner for specialist or lay audiences.
40	Attend conferences and meetings.
41	Aware of researchers in the research field.
42	Work in teams (e.g. research groups) on complex projects.
43	Reflect on the quality of teamwork and solve team-working problems as they arise.
44	Aware of techniques of giving feedback.
45	Aware of others in the research group.

### PART 3: OTHER ISSUES ABOUT CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH

From 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”, indicate your attitude regarding the following statements.

I encounter difficulty in conducting action research because,...

46	I fear that teacher-researcher will be shunned.
47	There is no assistance (substitute, collaboration) from colleagues and students.
48	There is conflict between the two “research-engaged” and “non-research-engaged” sides.
49	I am not competent enough to conduct research.
50	I am concerned that doing and sharing research will make instructional “problems” public (to learners and colleagues).
51	I believe that findings will not be of interest or value to anyone.
52	I consider teacher role as knowledge consumer, not generator.
53	I believe that research is done ON teachers rather than BY teachers.
54	I think research is an academic, large-scale, statistical and technically difficult activity.
55	I do not see the value of action research to professional development.
56	I do not have time to do research.
57	I do not have funds to support my research.
58	I do not have access to literature.
59	I do not have expert support, internal or external.
60	I do not have a good reason to do research.
61	There is no tangible benefit to being research-engaged.
62	My efforts are not acknowledged by colleagues or managers.
63	There is no interest is shown in my work by the authorities.
64	There is no opportunities to share the results of my research.
65	I do not have a sense of ownership for my research.
66	I do not have a clear structure/direction to guide teacher research.
67	Commercial schools maximize teacher workloads to make schools more profitable.
68	I am only paid for teaching time.
69	I am on part-time contract.
70	I must do a second job to earn a living.