# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORK ENVIRONMENT AND THEIR SENSE OF SELF-EFFICACY IN TEACHING EFL AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** The paper looked at environmental factors that influenced the self-efficacy in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of a group of university teachers in Vietnam. Very little empirical research on teachers' self-efficacy in EFL contexts has been done and self-efficacy quantitative studies heavily outnumber qualitative studies. The present research took the form of a qualitative case study. Data collection tools included focus group discussions, individual interviews, journaling, and observations. Findings suggest that there were certain features of work context, e.g. the teaching support and teaching recognition, which may have affected what constituted sources of efficacy information and how they operated. The study proposes that institutional support with regard to providing clearer policies, giving teachers more freedom in the classroom and more opportunities to get involved in the decision-making process might help teachers overcome feelings of doubt about how competent they were in their teaching. Moreover, it would be helpful to improve teaching conditions at the university, including providing enough textbooks and reducing class size. The development of professional programs or courses at the home institution that meet the teachers' knowledge needs may enable them to overcome doubt about their teaching abilities and engender in them a positive sense of self-efficacy.

**Keywords.** teacher self-efficacy, qualitative, work environment

## 1    INTRODUCTION

In academic literature, a teacher's sense of self-efficacy is defined as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" [44]. Research has indicated that teacher self-efficacy has important impacts on various aspects of teaching and learning. For example, teachers with a high sense of efficacy can motivate learners and improve their learning achievement [15], [16]. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy work more willingly with students who are having difficulties, invest considerable effort in finding appropriate teaching materials and activities, perform better, and are more likely to remain committed to their work [21], [44].

As teachers' self-efficacy influences numerous aspects of teaching and learning, it is important to consider factors which may impact on teachers' beliefs in their ability to teach. Research has shown that teachers' self-efficacy is influenced by a variety of factors, among them are teachers' perceptions of their personal teaching competence, perceptions of their analysis of teaching task and work environment [15], [21], [23], [34], [48].  Teachers' perceptions of work environment, e.g. physical working conditions, collegiality, supervision, have been widely considered taking an important role in the development of teachers' self-efficacy [49]. Specifically, researchers (e.g. [16], [17], [33], [35], [49]) suggest that the environment where the teachers are living and working can foster or impede the processing of certain types of sources of self-efficacy information. Given the vital role of context in influencing teacher self-efficacy, a growing volume of research has investigated this topic (e.g. [13], [16], [45], [49]). However, most of the research has been done in Western settings and there is a dearth of research exploring the self-efficacy of language teachers [26]. Upon an exhaustive review of the literature, research on the relationship between work environment and teachers' self-efficacy in Vietnam is virtually a blank state. In addition, the quantitative results outnumber qualitative ones [31]. Reference [31] note that the strength of qualitative studies in illuminating the synergy among the sources of efficacy information in comparison with quantitative studies is that they can provide clear examples of how participants internalize efficacy-relevant information in a complex way. Owing to the importance of the relationship between teachers'

self-efficacy and work environment and the insufficient number of qualitative studies, the purpose of this study is to examine how teacher perceptions of work environment impact on their self-efficacy in teaching EFL. It is expected that the study will help to recommend work conditions that may positively influence the self-efficacy of participating teachers. It is also hoped that a greater understanding of the effects of work environment on teachers' self-efficacy may be valuable to teachers, leaders and educators. The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of work environment?
2. Do teachers' perceptions of work environment influence teachers' self-efficacy in teaching EFL?
3. If yes, how do such perceptions impact on their self-efficacy?

## 2   LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1   Teacher self-efficacy

According to [3], teacher self-efficacy is a type of perceived self-efficacy, "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments". It is one's self-perception of competence, not one's actual level of competence [44]. Teacher self-efficacy should be "a judgment of capability" [3] and a "forward-looking capability" [24], not an intention to carry out a task. It is domain-, task-, and context-specific, e.g. under the influence of personal and environmental differences, an individual can judge his/her self-efficacy to perform similar tasks differently [39]. Self-efficacy can help to predict how much effort people put forth, how well they persevere in coping with challenges and how effectively they regulate their thoughts, actions and plans [2].

Reference [3] states that self-efficacy is best enhanced by a combination of four main sources of efficacy: mastery experiences (e.g. past experiences), vicarious experiences (e.g. observing other teachers), verbal persuasion (e.g. feedback), and physiological and emotional states (e.g. anxiety). Reference [3] also asserts that cognitive processing activates the operation of the sources, which then raises or lowers perceptions of self-efficacy. Bandura emphasises that these rules of weighting and integrating efficacy information vary among individuals and depend heavily on the availability of sources of efficacy information as well as socio-contextual factors. This is because teachers may adjust the way they weigh and interpret efficacy-relevant information to adapt to changes in the context. In addition, Reference [3] emphasises that experienced teachers' sense of efficacy tends to be resistant to modification unless there are critical events that invalidate their previous thinking.

### 2.2   A selective review of relevant studies on the impact of work environment on teacher self-efficacy

The research into how work environment influences teacher self-efficacy beliefs is not entirely new. A large number of scholars have been investigating the impact of certain features of context such as school context (e.g. teaching resources, student factors), academic climate (e.g. emphasis on academic achievement) and/or school setting (e.g. types of schools) on teacher self-efficacy. What they have found confirms that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs vary according to context [3]. For example, [40] conducted a quantitative study to understand teacher self-efficacy in teaching English for students in urban schools and suburban ones. The researcher found that teachers in suburban schools had a higher sense of self-efficacy than did their colleagues in urban schools, because they did not face such problems as big class sizes and a high percentage of students from low income areas with culturally and linguistic diversity and low English proficiency. Reference [10] reached the same conclusion when comparing the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in high-tracked middle schools and regular middle schools in Singapore. They found that a greater range of student ability groupings hindered the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in regular middle schools compared to their fellows in high-track schools. In addition, the availability of resources, the attitudes of colleagues and schools' goals were reported to affect the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in high-track schools. In [46]'s quantitative study, a principal's communication about and modelling of instructional expectations increased middle-school teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, whereas the principal's providing contingent rewards decreased their self-efficacy beliefs. Reference [21] explored South Korean early childhood teachers' perceptions of organisational health of schools. What they found supported the findings of [19] that a supportive school climate and a strong academic emphasis appear to be conducive to teachers' beliefs that they can teach different age-groups effectively in different teaching situations.

Another group of researchers examined whether participating in a new setting, i.e. in an intervention or development program or professional learning community, could lead to changes in teacher self-efficacy. The findings of these studies have yielded mixed results. Most researchers ( e.g. [7], [15], [26], [36]) suggest that the new setting increases the self-efficacy beliefs of participants. For example, twelve mathematics teachers at grade 3 and 6 in [7]'s quantitative study participated in a six-month development program which offered effective teaching strategies and peer teaching opportunities. The researchers claimed that the teachers' self-efficacy in teaching mathematics was enhanced by the end of the programme. According to [7], an increased sense of self-efficacy was due to an exposure to new and useful pedagogical knowledge, successful mastery experiences, opportunities to observe peers teach, positive feedback and positive emotional cues in the development programs, which encouraged the teachers to take risks and implement challenging strategies. Similarly, all teachers in the study of [26] experienced a high sense self-efficacy in writing and most of them had an increased sense of self-efficacy as teachers of writing after taking part in a professional development writing workshop. Most of the teachers interpreted the writing workshop experiences positively and reported useful changes in their teaching practices. The participants attributed this increase to several aspects of the workshop, including opportunities to produce different types of writing, to view the efforts of colleagues, and to receive comments from peers.

However, influencing the availability of sources of self-efficacy information through an intervention or development programme does not always bring about positive changes in teacher self-efficacy, especially when the content of the program does not provide enough information for the development of self-efficacy. For example, [32] examined the self-efficacy beliefs of pre-service elementary teachers before and after participating in a three-day education program. In their quantitative study, they found that the program did not produce a higher sense of self-efficacy beliefs among the teachers at the end of the program and the teachers' beliefs in their ability to teach dropped significantly after 7 weeks. The researchers explained that even though the teachers were exposed to a programme which aimed to facilitate their teaching practices, the program itself had several limitations which resulted in a lack of significant changes in teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Reference [32] stated that teacher self-efficacy does not appear to be easily influenced by a program offering simple materials (limited availability of cognitive mastery) and no opportunities to get feedback from students and mentors and to reinforce new knowledge, thus limiting the availability of enactive mastery and social persuasion. It appears that when development programs limit the availability of sources of self-efficacy information, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs may not enjoy significant enhancement.

Relatively little research has been directed at understanding how work environment shapes self-efficacy beliefs by mediating the availability of sources of self-efficacy information. Researchers who are interested in this issue (e.g. [30], [49]) suggest that the environment where the teachers are living and working can foster or impede the processing of certain types of sources of self-efficacy information. For example, the women in the qualitative study of [49] were taught to believe that they would not function as well as their male colleagues in science-related careers which were dominated by men. They experienced negative social messages about their academic futures. They were found to lack opportunities and were discouraged from engaging in mastery experiences in mathematics-related careers. The women reported relying on supportive feedback (social persuasion) and models (vicarious experiences) from important people, i.e. family members and teachers, to build their self-efficacy in pursuing their selected careers. There were limited mastery experiences for the participants in the social environment but, at the same time, the environment directed the women to pay attention to available feedback and models to overcome academic and career challenges and to persist in the profession.

In summary, it is generally agreed that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs depend on the work environment in which the sources of self-efficacy are experienced. Researchers disagree on whether participating in a new setting can enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. It is because of this disagreement and of the dominant position of quantitative self-efficacy studies, that re-focusing self-efficacy research on interpretation of sources of self-efficacy information is likely to provide valuable insight into understanding how teachers' perceptions of work environment relate to teachers' self-efficacy beliefs.

## 3    METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The study took the form of a qualitative study because qualitative research assumes that knowledge is constructed out of ongoing human interactions and is developed within a social context [41], [42]. Qualitative research looks for understanding of human subjective experience, of participants' perspectives on their actions and on the contexts surrounding them [29].

### 3.1  Participants

The participants in this study were eight university teachers, one male and seven females, who teach General English and IELTS for students who have failed the university entrance exam to any other universities and subsequently register at one of three joint-programmes: business administration, information technology, and accounting and auditing. The university where the teachers worked is a technical university in the South of Vietnam. The teachers' age ranged from 30 to 42. The years of teaching experience ranged from 7 to 17 years. All teachers have earned Master's Degrees in TESOL from different universities in Vietnam. The teachers chose their own pseudonyms.

### 3.2  Research instruments

The study took the form of a qualitative study, premised on the assumption that knowledge is constructed out of ongoing human interactions and is developed within a social context [42]. Qualitative research aims to understand human subjective experience – participants' perspectives on their actions and on the contexts surrounding them [29]. The researcher employed individual interviews, journaling, observation and focus group discussion as research tools in her study exploring the impact of culture on Vietnamese teachers' self-efficacy. The author was in the field for seven months and data collection lasted six months. Focus group discussions were used at the beginning and end of the data collection period. This research instrument is generally regarded as facilitating participation and interpersonal communication and to encourage a supportive environment [43], which aligns broadly with certain Vietnamese cultural values. Because the teachers in the study had never participated in any research, the stressful feeling probably produced by their first-time participation in research was hopefully lessened by peers' presence [28]. Two rounds of individual interviews were an important data-collection instrument for the study. Collecting self-reported interpretations of the participants' experiences was important, as it was anticipated that each teacher in the study would have a different way of internalizing efficacy information.Participants were also invited to keep weekly journal entries over a three-month period. Journaling helped enable the researcher to keep track of and understand each participant's perspective on significant events and experiences in their own words [18]. Such data had the potential to help track possible changes in or development of the teachers' perceptions of the impact of various ongoing activities and experiences [14] , although such changes and development might not occur for all participants. Observations conducted during the data collection period served as a basis for certain interview questions and enabled the researcher to contextualize findings based on interviews and reflective journaling. Non-participant observation was chosen because a complete observer does not interfere with people or activities under observation [11]. In all, 20 observations of teachers' formal and informal meetings were conducted. Each observation session lasted approximately 45-60 min. Only formal meetings were audio-recorded. Notes were taken during informal observation sessions. Follow-up interviews were also arranged to have participants validate the accuracy of the researcher's observations. In this study, triangulation as a process is viewed as consistent with the perspective of multiple realities in constructionist/constructivist epistemology. This study used "within-method" triangulation. It brought together four different types of research instrument: individual interview combined with focus group discussion, journaling and observation. The study was also person and time triangulated. The data collection period was six months and the responses from eight participants were gathered at different points in time.

### 3.3  Data analysis

An inductive coding process as suggested by [11] was used for analyzing data, along with thematic analysis as suggested by [6]. Recordings were transcribed immediately following an interview or observation session. The transcripts were sent back to participants to add or modify content. A range of

strategies were used to warrant the claim of trustworthiness in the study: participants' checking of transcripts; triangulation of data instruments, thick description of participants' responses, sharing themes with other PhD students and prolonged engagement in the field [12]. The rights of participating teachers to privacy and confidentiality were always respected. The teachers chose their own pseudonyms. For ethical reasons, in this study, the usual pseudonyms were not used in instances where teachers made critical comments of management practices. The collection, analysis and interpretation of data are inevitably influenced by the researcher's experiences as a teacher of English and by her cultural background as a Vietnamese. The information obtained from the teachers, the transcripts and the interpretation of the data are not to be viewed as facsimile representations of the participants' perspectives. The data themselves need to be viewed as versions or accounts of participants' real experiences or perceptions [37] and the transcripts as an interpretive process which never entirely captures actual communicative events [20].

## 4  FINDINGS

### 4.1  Teaching support

How the study teachers perceived support from colleagues and leaders at the university and the Faculty regarding improving their professional knowledge and skills appeared to negatively influence their analysis of teaching demands in relation to their competence. Findings suggest that a lack of genuine support was perceived as a constraint on teachers being effective classroom practitioners since they did not feel supported to incorporate new strategies in the classroom.

**Collegiality** The study teachers all agreed that collegiality existed but was found only in small groups of teachers who were close friends and was considered not to fully satisfy teachers' needs. For example, in her second interview, Anh talked about a teacher who lent her own writing lesson plans. The teacher's lesson plans helped her "save a lot of time preparing" and "better" her own lesson plans, and "know in advance what people [leaders and students] expect from" (IT2ANH). This indicates that Anh's belief about her ability to fulfil certain teaching requirements was somewhat supported by such support. In answering my follow-up question, "What other kind of support do you receive from your colleagues?" Anh had a long pause before talking. She directly told me she was not sure if reaching an agreement on what to select from textbooks was really support. Anh's pause and talk suggest that she was not satisfied with this kind of collegiality. Like Anh, Thu appeared to expect a more convincing and specific kind of support from her colleague, "but I am not sure if her way of teaching is successful in my class. I wish she let me observe how she does that in her class" (IT2THU). In responding to my follow-up question, "Is it possible to seek the same help from every colleague?" she immediately stated that her previous friendship and trust with that colleague led to open, constructive discussions and she could not seek the same help from anyone else in the Faculty.

Data from observation sessions also indicated that a culture of sharing seemed to exist in groups of teachers, but the teachers seemed not to be entirely satisfied with such support. At teacher meetings, the teachers always sat and whispered in their own groups, and rarely talked to colleagues in other groups. There were physical gaps between groups in the meeting room (FMO1; FMO2; FMO3). While hanging out with one another, teachers sometimes discussed and shared ideas about how to improve their teaching instruction or how to deal with a classroom situation but those discussions were often short (limited collegiality). For example, Thu, Hoa and Nhung spent only 7 out of 60 minutes in exchanging ideas about motivating a lazy student in a class in which each of them taught a different subject (IMO4).

During the follow-up discussions after observation sessions, the teachers commented that they would feel more confident in incorporating elements of the teaching strategies which were shared by colleagues into their teaching instruction, if they had a chance to witness their colleagues teach in their classroom or to discuss the teaching strategies further with other teachers at the Faculty to confirm its applicability (FI-IMO4HOA; FI-IMO4THU). Findings suggest that teachers' perceived a lack of collegiality as a constraint on teaching, since they did not feel supported to implement new teaching strategies as they would have liked. A perceived lack of social persuasion (opportunities to discuss professional knowledge) and vicarious experience (opportunities to watch others teach) resulted in the teachers believing that a lack of collegiality impeded their teaching practice.

However, according to the study teachers, a lack of feedback and professional discussion around their teaching did not mean they lacked pedagogical knowledge and skills. The teachers continued to display a strong belief in their teaching competence. For example, My told me in her second individual interview:

If any colleagues or leaders gave me some advice on how I should teach, I would feel like having 'wings'. But if not, I can still do well, like what I'm doing now (IT2MY).

The reasons for their strong sense of personal teaching competence during the first steps of my data-collection period may well be related to a specific Vietnamese cultural factor – the concept of face (Phan, 2016).

**Professional development opportunities** Findings suggest that the study teachers' perceptions of the lack of institutional support in terms of providing professional development opportunities had a negative impact on their beliefs about their competence to fulfil teaching requirements. A perceived lack of social persuasion and vicarious experiences (formal opportunities to receive feedback and watch colleagues teach) resulted in teachers' negative emotions and a feeling of not being supported to widen their knowledge of teaching requirements. In this section, where study teachers made negative comments on leadership practices, the usual pseudonyms will not be used.

Firstly, the study teachers reported that there was no formal opportunity to critically review and improve their classroom instruction among colleagues. In the second interview, five teachers said that the content of monthly teacher meetings disappointed them. The teachers used a number of negative words and phrases to describe meeting topics and the attitudes of attendees: "irrelevant topics", "no important contents with vague words last in only 15 minutes", "no contribution to professional knowledge", "useless", "general topics", "no one shares teaching strategies or new ideas". Data from four observation sessions of formal teacher meetings indicated that topics typically presented at these meetings were new announcements, university development and new regulations. Technical and managerial problems in classrooms such as computer breakdowns, student discipline or late provision of textbooks were also raised (FMO1; FMO2; FMO3). In these observation sessions, I noticed that all study teachers listened to Faculty leaders talk and rarely contributed to the discussion. A follow-up question, "Why do you often keep silent during teacher meetings?" helped to reveal that it was because the teachers felt uninterested and bored with what was happening. The teachers wanted the Faculty leader to focus more on inviting them to discuss professional topics such as instructional goals or improving teaching performance but the content of the meetings did not encourage such expectations (FI-FMO3).

Secondly, three teachers, My, Hoa and Nhung also noted that there was a serious lack of professional development courses or conferences for EFL teachers in the Faculty. These three teachers emphasized the importance of new knowledge and experiences gained from attending such courses or conferences in helping them improve their teaching strategies. For example, My said that such knowledge could "change" the way she looked at students and her teaching methodology and that she felt "interested in implementing these ideas". My used a proverb "*đi một ngày đàng, học một sàng khôn*" [travel broadens the mind] to emphasize the need to go outside the university context to learn from other experts (IT2MY).

Findings indicate that teachers' beliefs about their competence to meet various teaching requirements were undermined by a perceived lack of social persuasion and vicarious experiences (opportunities to receive feedback and watch others' teach), which was often accompanied by negative emotions.

The next sections will add more to the picture of how teachers' perceptions of external factors influenced their analysis of teaching demands.

## 4.2  Physical working conditions

All study teachers stated that teaching resources (lack of or availability), the syllabus and classroom arrangements significantly affected their sense of capability to meet various teaching demands as they perceived these physical working conditions fostered or constrained their daily practice. In addition, there seemed to be a relationship between the teaching approaches the individual teachers implemented and what they perceived as constraints at the institution and the Faculty.

**Teaching resources** Some study teachers made complaints about Faculty teaching resources. However, these study teachers differed in their perceptions of how aspects of teaching resources (or lack of) impacted on their ability to fulfil different teaching requirements.

Nhung and Phuong complained that the lack of (up-to-date) textbooks hindered their teaching self-efficacy. For example, Nhung complained about the out-of-date speaking textbook. She considered that teaching listening skills required her to provide updated English vocabulary to learners; however, the textbook remained the same for several years. Saying that "at least" an updated textbook could give students "timely and standard English vocabulary and topics" which, she, as "a non-native teacher", could not do (IT2NHUNG). Phuong also stated that the typical replacement of textbooks by photocopied materials at the beginning of every semester "lessened the effectiveness" of her lesson. She reported that students "did not like the materials" or "became lazy" when learning with these "temporary" materials. She found herself very "anxious" whenever the new semester started because she had to put up with "students' complaints about textbooks" (IT2PHUONG). Both these teachers saw a perceived lack of adequate teaching resources as a constraint on effective teaching. Their reliance on textbooks also suggests their commitment to the GTM and a low sense of self-efficacy in teaching EFL communicatively. Truly self-efficacious teachers might not consider the lack of textbooks as a hindrance but a positive challenge to adapt their teaching approach.

My and Hoa discussed how the inadequate technical support provided by the Faculty hampered their efforts to teach better. For example, they stated that they never got timely support when informing the Faculty about the sudden breakdown of computers in the classroom. Computers were considered "an essential tool", "a key tool" enhancing their teaching practice, "making the slides more attractive and creative" but their lessons were "interrupted" (IT2MY, IT2HOA) because of faulty equipment which was exacerbated by slow technical support. The two teachers emphasized that this slow support was "quite usual" and significantly made them feel "dissatisfied" and "unhappy" because "it was not [their] fault" that the lesson "became lengthy and boring". The usage of computers as described by the two teachers indicates their commitment to a communicative approach. Their complaints suggest their competence in using CLT was compromised by a perceived lack of technical support.

Findings indicate that teachers' perceived lack of support regarding teaching resources from the institution produced negative feelings (affective states) and led to unsuccessful teaching experiences (mastery experiences) among the teachers.

**Syllabus** The study teachers held different views toward the syllabus guidelines. The first group of teachers, Hung, Thanh, Thu and Phuong, complained that the syllabus was "too general", "not detailed and clear enough". They were not sure that their teaching approaches and results matched syllabus requirements. Besides,Thanh and Hung felt constrained by the syllabus time-frame, saying that they did not have enough time to "cover all important points" specified in the syllabus (IT2THU; IT2PHUONG), to "check whether students understood" the lessons or to "check students' work carefully" (IT2THANH; IT2HUNG).Therefore, they felt that their teaching effectiveness was affected negatively by syllabus demands. The second group, Anh, My and Hoa did not consider the general goals of the syllabus as an obstacle to their teaching ability. In contrast, they believed this was an opportunity for "competent and effective" teachers to show their "real" abilities. They suggested that the general goals of the syllabus gave them freedom to decide "what and how to teach". These three teachers talked at length about how they enjoyed being able to select teaching content and teaching styles suitable to different classes (IT2ANH; IT2MY; IT2HOA). Findings suggest that the syllabus was a constraint on task implementation for Hung, Thanh, Thu and Phuong but an opportunity for Anh, My and Hoa. Findings also indicate that teachers who considered the syllabus a constraint tended to follow the GTM. Others who believed that the syllabus supported their task implementation were more oriented to CLT.

**Classroom arrangements** Classroom arrangements also affected the sense of capability to meet teaching requirements for some study teachers. Once again, the complaints the teachers made about classroom arrangements seem to relate to the teaching approaches they followed. My, Hoa and Nhung reported that the lack of sound proofing of classroom walls prevented them from implementing communicative activities in the classroom. For example, My talked and wrote about her "irritated" feeling when a next-door teacher requested her to restrain the students from talking too loud. She explained, "How can I teach a speaking lesson without encouraging my students to discuss?" My said she felt discouraged from implementing interactive activities in the classroom (IT1MY). Hoa's implementation of communicative activities was reported as affected by classroom arrangements. A large number of tables

and chairs in rows was seen as creating a "physical gap" between the teacher and her students, making it difficult for students to "work in groups or pairs" and for the teacher and students to "move around the classroom" (IT2HOA). Hung complained about the working capacity of air-conditioners and the location of toilets in the building where his classroom was located. He claimed that because of the poor operation of the air-conditioners, the heat in the classroom made his students less able to concentrate in his lessons. Besides, the students often came to class late because it took too long for them to go to toilets located in other buildings. He felt "it [was] difficult to encourage students' motivation while they [were] tired" (IT1HUNG). Anh and Thu complained about the quality of speakers, projectors and blackboards at the Faculty. Anh wrote in her entries that the quality of these facilities "played a key role in contributing to the success of the lesson". She wrote that many times she and her students "lost interest in teaching and learning" because they had to "move up and down" the building to find a vacant room with a good projector (RJ1ANH; RJ3ANH). Such findings suggest that My and Hoa were committed to a communicative approach, Anh, Thu and Hung to the GTM and Nhung, in this specific context, to a communicative approach. However, the working environment overall appeared to induce the teachers to follow the GTM. Findings suggest that classroom arrangements impeded teachers' implementation of certain tasks. Teachers' complaints (a negative form of social persuasion) were associated with negative emotions and perceived unsuccessful teaching experiences (mastery experiences).

Class size and student groupings in the language classroom also inhibited teachers' sense of ability in relation to meeting teaching demands. Some of the teachers claimed that over thirty students in a classroom were "too much to teach effectively". Thanh and Anh said that they did not have enough time to check the work of all students (IT1THANH; IT1ANH). Hung complained that it was difficult for him to "keep all students in order and be attentive to [his] talk" (IT1HUNG). My and Nhung wrote that they "[could] not provide help to every student" when the number of students was over twenty (RJ5MY; RJ4NHUNG). Besides, where teaching classes consisted of students with different levels of proficiency, teachers reported negative feelings: feeling "uncomfortable", "unhappy", "stressed" and "tired". Findings indicate that teachers perceived class size and grouping as a constraint on their teaching. Teachers' complaints about class size and grouping were accompanied by negative emotions and perceived unsuccessful teaching experiences (mastery experiences).

In sum, there appears to be a relationship between the teachers' perceptions of working constraints and the teaching approaches they followed. The teachers who committed to a communicative approach and those who followed the GTM tended to be affected by their perceptions of working conditions differently. Generally, the working environment appeared less inhibiting of teachers' implementation of the GTM. The teachers' perceptions of negative factors impeding their task implementation were grounded on their perceptions of working constraints (social persuasion), negative feelings and past teaching experiences.

## 4.3  Supervision and decision-making processes

The study teachers' sense of capability to meet teaching requirements appeared to be influenced by how they perceived they were being supervised and invited into decision-making processes at the Faculty and institution. Teachers perceived that their teaching requirements became more difficult owing to supervisors' intrusion into their instructional time and a lack of trust from leaders. Data for this section mostly came from my follow-up interviews after observing teacher meetings. I invited the teachers to share their views on what they liked and did not like while working at the institution and the Faculty. For ethical reasons, the usual pseudonyms will not be used where teachers made critical comments on supervision practice.

First, the teachers reported negative feelings when experiencing teaching supervision practice at the institution. For example, one participant felt "irritated" and "uncomfortable" when a supervisor sometimes "stood behind classroom window" and "stared" into the classroom. This made the participant "less concentrated on teaching" and consequently "lost motivation to teach". Three participantssaid their lessons were often interrupted by a supervisor's visit to announce the institution's new regulations. One participant used a rhetorical question: "I was instructing my students and all were very attentive. Suddenly, a person stopped all of us to do something very irrelevant. Would you do so?" Another

participant also wrote about her unpleasant feeling when a supervisor went straight into her classroom to wake a student up:

I was surprised at first. What's this man doing here? Then I realized that he criticized a student because that student put his head on the table. I got angry but didn't say anything to that supervisor.

The participant wrote that it was her "responsibility and right" to let her students do what she thought to be good for them in her classroom (a high sense of personal competence). Saying that students have rights in her classrooms, this teacher thought they could have a quick rest if they felt they were unable to study. The teacher used the word "non-educational" to describe the supervising practice at the institution. It appears that the study teachers' sense of professional autonomy was limited by supervisors' disruptions of class time (a lack of trust, a negative form of social persuasion), leading to negative feelings about their teaching rights (emotions/physiological states). Findings also support teachers' high sense of teaching competence, since the teachers indicated that they knew what they were doing in their classrooms. However, intrusion into their teaching appeared to impede their teaching effectiveness.

Secondly, all teachers reported that they were not genuinely encouraged to get involved in institutional decision-making, which was another version of a lack of trust (social persuasion) coming from leaders. They all mentioned the institution's new decision to reduce the number of English learning periods without asking teachers' opinions as one example of leaders' disregard of teachers' contributions. One participant used the word "contradictory" to describe the institution's requirement of ensuring teaching quality and its decision to reduce teaching periods. In one follow-up interview, the participant said that it was "impossible" for teachers at the Faculty to "maintain", let alone to "improve" teaching quality, when they did not have enough time to teach in the classroom. Another participant said in her second interview: "They [leaders] did not listen to us. They did not care about our voice". All the teachers emphasized that this decision created "teaching pressure", "teaching anxiety" for the teachers because it forced them to do something that they believed they could not do. Since teachers perceived that teaching demands became more difficult owing to institutional decisions (a lack of trust – social persuasion), they viewed their ability to meet teaching demands as constrained by these decisions.

The second example of the institution's ignoring of the teachers' voice mentioned by the participating teachers was its promulgation of yearly internal regulations. The teachers, in their follow-up interviews, used a number of negative words and phrases to describe this: "another example of empty formalism", "same as ever", "whether the regulations were sent to the teachers is not important, nothing will be changed", "the regulations are already fixed without our contribution", "we have no voice", "we can't change anything". It is evident that the teachers had no voice in decision-making, even decisions directly related to their work and their benefits. The disappointment and perceived powerlessness because of a lack of trust contributed to teacher pessimism, which undermined their beliefs in their ability to do their job.

In short, the way the study teachers were supervised and treated as outsiders regarding decision-making processes induced negative feelings and teaching anxiety which consequently lowered their beliefs in their capacity to meet task requirements. In other words, a lack of trust from people in power, a negative version of social persuasion, had the potential to influence the teachers' emotions/physiological states negatively and constrain their ability to do their jobs.

## 4.4  Job security

In responding to a question in the follow-up interview where I asked them what they liked and disliked when teaching EFL at the Faculty, and in some journal entries, teachers mentioned the threat of job insecurity as a major factor which negatively impacted on their perceptions of professional autonomy. The teachers discussed two main events contributing to this threat: the rumour that the Faculty would be merged with another Faculty and another new policy that allowed colleagues and leaders to observe teachers in the classroom. The perceived ability to fulfil teaching demands of all teachers bar My was affected negatively in the way that they became uncertain about their teaching futures and their teaching practice.

Four study teachers, Nhung, Hoa, Thu and Phuong, stated that they were uncertain and worried about whether their teaching performance and practices would satisfy attendees (colleagues and leaders) of their lessons. The worry and uncertainty was rooted in their belief that the purpose of classroom observations

was to point out teachers' weaknesses, "*vạch lá tìm sâu*" [fault finding]" (FI2NHUNG) rather than giving constructive feedback. According to these teachers, classroom observations aimed to find reasons to fire teachers. The four teachers talked about the stress caused by the threat of evaluation and confusion in relation to the choice of suitable teaching practices to cope with evaluations. For example, Phuong mentioned being "sleepless" when she was sure "how she would be negatively evaluated" (FI2PHUONG). Hoa said that she would "cudgel [her] brain" in order to figure out which practices might escape negative comments (FI2HOA). Thu said she was "worried" and "couldn't concentrate on teaching" because it was "impossible" for her to please every attendee (FI2THU). Findings suggest that issues of job insecurity negatively influenced how teachers taught and caused an increased sense of inhibiting work constraints among the teachers.

Hung, Thu, Nhung and Hoa discussed how job instability influenced their emotions and teaching practices. The teachers tended to adopt the GTM under the influence of job security pressure. Nhung said that she was "very disappointed", "very worried" and "sleepless" because she was "puzzled" over where she would go if the Faculty no longer existed (IT2NHUNG). She also wrote that she felt "really tired" and "just want[ed] to finish lessons quickly and [went] home" because she felt that her job was so "unstable". She "no longer want[ed] to stay awake to search for different activities on the Internet" (RJ2NHUNG). Thu said that she was "worried about losing the job" and she might "spend more time looking for a part-time job rather than thinking about using interactive activities" in her classroom (FI2THU). Similarly, Hung and Hoa both described how job instability limited their efforts in teaching. They discussed the possibility of reducing the amount of time preparing lesson plans and the possibility of selecting practices which did not require much effort, implying that they would teach less effectively (FI2HUNG; RJ7HOA). The teachers' tendencies to reframe teaching strategies as a response to job insecurity pressures (a version of social persuasion) suggest how a negative perception of environmental factors can impact on an analysis of the requirements of certain teaching tasks. Findings also indicate a tendency in teachers to commit to the GTM under the influence of job insecurity pressures.

Three teachers, Thanh, Hung and Nhung expressed a concern that they would monitor their teaching practices carefully and try not to do anything that was out-of-keeping with the prevailing teaching culture at the Faculty and the university in order to secure working positions. These teachers believed that what was expected by students, colleagues and leaders was a minimum number of failing students every semester. The teachers differed in terms of what they would do to conform to this teaching culture. Hung and Thanh said that they would either "adjust students' marks" or "deliver easy tests with simple grammar exercises" although both of them disagreed with these solutions, claiming them to be "ineffective" (FI2THANH) or "not good for the education system" (FI2HUNG). Nhung said that she would "examine [her] own teaching practices and teaching strategies" and her "testing styles" in order to make sure that "[her] tests were not too easy or too challenging" compared to standardized tests at the Faculty. Nhung also talked about her recent decision to train students testing strategies, thereby enabling many of them pass Faculty exams (FI2NHUNG). Findings suggested an inclination to adopt the GTM under the influence of a surveillance regime. Teachers' reported negative feelings suggest a lowered sense of capability to fulfill teaching requirements.

In summary, findings suggest that the pressure of job insecurity and an overpowering surveillance regime (negative versions of social persuasion) undermined teachers' beliefs about their capacity to meet the specific requirements of their work. The reduced feeling of professional autonomy resulted in doubt about their ability to enact certain strategies and practices, which was accompanied by a number of negative feelings. Some participants also expressed a preference for *safe* teaching practices and were inclined to follow the GTM on this basis.

## 4.5  Teaching recognition

The feedback coming from leaders generally decreased teachers' beliefs in their teaching ability. In essence, all teachers complained that there was either a lack of recognition or face-value recognition of their teaching ability and effort at the university. This state of no or minimal recognition (a negative form of social persuasion) led to a feeling of disappointment (negative emotion) where teaching was not valued, or a feeling of confusion and self-doubt about how competent they were in teaching EFL. In this

section, the usual pseudonyms will not be used in instances where teachers made comments critical of management practices.

All teachers used negative words and phrases to describe how certain leaders acknowledged their teaching ability: "no one says anything", "never hear anything", "that never happens, "never". In the second interview, one teacher said that most teachers were never acknowledged for what they "contributed to the development of the Faculty and university". Two teacher participants used rhetorical questions to answer my question: "Leaders compliment us on our teaching ability?", "Recognition for our teaching ability and effort?" I reminded the teachers of the title 'Teaching Excellence' given to them at the end of every teaching year and asked them if it was a sign of recognition from the university. The teachers commented on the title and most of them sounded ironic. They said that it was "like a trick", "not worthy and noticeable", because the amount of money that went with it was "too little", which implied that "leaders didn't really value [their] teaching ability". They complained that the title was like "whose turn" or "who taught the most". One participant emphasised that it was "an empty formality", "a paper" which "[was] no longer put in a frame". All of these seemed to indicate that receiving leaders' genuine recognition for teaching ability and effort was not something they really experienced (negative forms of social persuasion). Their uses of words and phrases summed up their disappointment (negative emotions) when their teaching ability and effort were not recognized by responsible leaders.

All teachers reported being confused or self-doubting when there was a lack of top-down recognition or reward for their teaching ability and effort. The teachers said that they did not know whether their teaching ability "[was] good enough" (IT2NHUNG) or whether they "contribute[d] enough" (IT2MY) or "what should be changed" (IT2HOA). The lack of recognition seemed to produce in teachers a sense that they were inadequate in their knowledge or that their teaching strategies were not effective. Anh listed many things she did last semester:

I attended every teacher meeting. I wasn't absent from work for a single day last semester. I didn't make any fault at work. I fulfilled every requirement. (IT2ANH)

This list indicates that Anh strongly believed she did a lot of things an effective teacher often does. However, as mentioned above, the fact that she never heard anything from leaders left her with uncertainty about her teaching ability: "Sometimes I think they haven't done anything maybe it's because I have problems with my teaching ability or because I'm new here. I don't know..." (IT2ANH). Such findings suggest teachers' perceptions of teaching competence were lowered by a perceived lack of leaders' recognition.

As reported in this section, teachers appeared to have fluctuating self-efficacy due to the types of feedback they received from students, colleagues and leaders. The positive feedback they received from students and colleagues seemed to boost their beliefs in their teaching competence while lack of feedback from leaders undermined these beliefs. Findings in this section suggest that the teachers strengthened their perceptions of teaching competence on the basis of others' feedback (social persuasion) which impacted on their feelings (emotional states) and their perceptions of teaching performance (mastery experiences).

## 5    DISCUSSIONS

In the study, findings suggest that there were certain features of work environment that affected what constituted sources of efficacy information and how they operated. Leadership practice and collegiality at the university where the teachers were employed seemed to limit the availability of mastery experiences and vicarious experiences, thus highlighting the role of social persuasion. Lack of professional development opportunities seemed to deprive study teachers of formal opportunities to watch others teach and share experiences (vicarious experiences), thus constraining access to the mastery of professional knowledge which [34] refers to as "cognitive pedagogical mastery". Enactive mastery—mastery of previous teaching experiences [3]—was elusive since teachers' perceptions of successful teaching was affected by the feedback of others—students, colleagues, and leaders—but teachers were never given genuine recognition or feedback by leaders and rarely by colleagues. Findings also suggest that leadership practice at the university conditioned the forms of social persuasion and emotional states available. The teachers in the study perceived supervisors' intrusion on their teaching time and the implementation of new educational policies at the workplace as indicating a

lack of trust in their teaching competence (negative forms of social persuasion). Teachers reported feeling disappointment, self-doubt and anxiety due to a lack of support from leaders. The availability and condition of teaching resources and the nature of classroom arrangements all created teaching pressures, anxiety, unhappiness and dissatisfaction among the teachers. Reference [3] states that the self-affirming beliefs of others can promote or diminish development of skills and a sense of self-efficacy in individuals. The university where the study teachers worked sent messages which the teachers interpreted as suggesting that they were not valuable or competent staff, or they were not supported to teach in the way they believed they should be. Exposure to an unsupportive environment can potentially lead to teachers' diminished sense of self-efficacy. The above findings corroborates [3]'s and [44]'s assertion that context informs and conditions the formation of teacher self-efficacy.

The powerful influence of work environment in shaping sources of self-efficacy is also confirmed in previous studies. For example, contextual factors and the environment in part highlighted the influence of vicarious experience on self-efficacy [49], resulted in the critical effect of social persuasion on self-efficacy [30], and made mastery experiences the most relevant sources of efficacy information for participants ([1], [33], [34].

In the study, the self-efficacy of eight study teachers was subject to change as a result of the work context in which the appraisals were made. All teachers experienced a high sense of self-efficacy and tended to use more interactive activities when teaching highly motivated, high achieving students. In contrast, they experienced a low sense of self-efficacy when teaching low-achieving and badly behaved students. Besides, positive feedback the teachers received from students and colleagues seemed to boost their self-efficacy while lack of feedback from leaders diminished their self-efficacy. The finding that teachers' self-efficacy fluctuated in different contexts is consistent with [3]'s assertion that self-efficacy is context specific. This finding also lends support to that of previous studies (e.g. [8], [10], [16], [17], [19], [20]) that the setting of the school influences perceptions of teaching self-efficacy, as discussed earlier.

## 6   CONCLUSION

My study draws attention to the role of work environment in altering self-efficacy  [3], [44]. It demonstrates that several features of local context shape sources of efficacy information and adds to the contribution of qualitative inquiry in investigating this issue in the selfefficacy literature. Interviews with teachers, journaling, and observations provided a unique glimpse into the complex environments in which self-efficacy beliefs emerge. Semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to elaborate on their experiences, which shed light on the significant role of social persuasion and the minor role of mastery experiences and vicarious experiences as a function of context. The study addresses the lack, raised by [48] and [25], of qualitative studies that investigated in any depth the impact of context on teacher self-efficacy.

Findings included teachers' concerns about leadership and its effects on their self-efficacy and teaching practices. Institutional support with regard to providing clearer policies, giving teachers more freedom in the classroom and more opportunities to get involved in the decision-making process might help teachers overcome feelings of doubt about how competent they were in their teaching. Such support has the potential to strengthen teacher self-efficacy and teaching practices [2]. Moreover, it would be helpful to improve teaching conditions at the university, including providing enough textbooks and reducing class size, because adequate teaching resources and working conditions have generally been found to raise teacher self-efficacy [40]. Improved leadership practice will be likely to engender a positive sense of self-efficacy among staff and equip them to overcome a low sense of self-efficacy [46]. In addition, the study suggests that the development of professional programs or courses at the home institution that meet the teachers' knowledge needs may enable them to overcome doubt about their teaching abilities and engender in them a positive sense of self-efficacy [27].

It should be noted that the study investigated the self-efficacy of a group of teachers over a period of six months, longitudinal studies being desirable to help understand context-influenced changes in teacher self-efficacy. It is possible that participants overestimated or underestimated the role of efficacy-relevant information. It is also feasible that they were unable to remember past events or uncomfortable to disclose certain personal information. Thus this study suffers from the shortcomings of self-report studies. Despite

these limitations, this study represents an encouraging attempt to investigate the influence of work context on language teacher self-efficacy, particularly in the rarely explored EFL settings. Given the importance of supporting sustainable teacher development [22], more research on the impact of work context on teacher self-efficacy can provide more clues to improve and enhance the competence in teaching of language teachers.

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# NHẬN THỨC VỀ MÔI TRƯỜNG LÀM VIỆC VÀ MỐI LIÊN HỆ GIỮA MÔI TRƯỜNG LÀM VIỆC VỚI LÒNG TỰ TIN TRONG VIỆC DẠY TIẾNG ANH HIỆU QUẢ CỦA MỘT NHÓM GIẢNG VIÊN Ở MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC TẠI VIỆT NAM

**Tóm tắt**. Bài báo nghiên cứu ảnh hưởng của môi trường làm việc tới lòng tự tin trong việc dạy tiếng Anh. Có rất nhiều nghiên cứu khẳng định rằng nếu như giảng viên không có lòng tự tin trong việc dạy tiếng Anh, họ sẽ dạy kém hiệu quả, sinh viên sẽ đạt kết quả học tập không tốt. Hiện nay, có rất ít các bài báo nghiên cứu về đề tài này ở những nước mà tiếng Anh không phải là ngôn ngữ thứ nhất. Hơn nữa, hầu hết các bài báo này đều sử dụng phương pháp định lượng cho dù một số nhà khoa học gần đây đã chỉ ra ưu thế của phương pháp định tính so với định lượng trong việc thu thập và xử lý dữ liệu liên quan đến đề tài này. Bài báo này sử dụng nghiên cứu tình huống định tính với các công cụ nghiên cứu: thảo luận nhóm, phỏng vấn cá nhân, quan sát và viết nhật ký. Kết quả cho thấy một số yếu tố môi trường làm việc như sự giúp đỡ của nhà quản lý, quy trình đánh giá, v.v…, đã ảnh hưởng tới nguồn thông tin giảng viên tiếp cận mà từ đó họ xây dựng lòng tự tin. Bài báo khuyến nghị rằng sự hỗ trợ từ trường đại học như việc đưa ra chính sách minh bạch, cho phép giảng viên có nhiều quyền hạn hơn, việc tham gia tích cực vào quá trình hoạch định chính sách, và xây dựng các khóa học bồi dưỡng đúng nhu cầu, v.v…có thể giúp giảng viên dạy tiếng Anh hiệu quả hơn.
**Từ khóa**. lòng tự tin của giảng viên, nghiên cứu định tính, môi trường làm việc