

VIETNAMESE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about approaches to teaching and learning, the 'good' teacher, the 'good' learner and in particular how notions of these may differ regionally. Even more focus has been placed upon the links between culture, pedagogy and learning practices especially with learners from Asian backgrounds.

This article documents responses, reflections and narratives collected from 10 Vietnamese English language teachers on site in Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam in an interpretivist-interactionist study which was qualitative in its approach. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, participants reflected upon what made a 'good' teacher and a 'good' learner concluding, on the whole, that personal characteristics are as important as technique or strategy. Some participants also reported having mixed feelings about Western educational theory and related teaching practices and were either critical of notions of Asians as reproductive, passive and uncritical in their learning approach or offered insights into the reasons for these approaches to learning.

Key words: the 'good' teacher; the 'good' learner; Western educational discourses; Asian approaches to learning; internationalisation

1. Introduction and background

International education has been through many different phases in Australia, from 'educational aid' in the postwar period to 'educational trade' in the 1970s and 1980s to 'internationalisation' from the early 1990s (Trevaskes, Eisenchlas & Liddicoat, 2003). In the higher education sector, Francis has described internationalisation of education as a total transition of a community into global living and working. He says, it is 'a process that prepares the community for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world' (Francis, 1993, p. 5). He also adds that 'the process should infuse all facets of the post-secondary education system, fostering global understanding and developing skills for effective living and working in a diverse world' (Francis, 1993, p.5).

Of particular interest these days are what have been termed 'transnational' educational programmes, described as follows:

any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be

crossed by information about the education, and by staff and/or educational materials (whether the information and the materials travel by mail, computer network, radio or television broadcast or other means) (GATE, 1997, p. 1)

These university transnational programs are on the increase. One such program has been running as a joint venture between an Australian university and a Vietnamese provider for several years now. Vietnamese English language teachers enrol in an MA Applied Linguistics course offered by an Australian university through a private provider in Ho Chi Minh City in order to upgrade their language teaching skills. The units focus on language teaching and learning theory as well as course design, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and language analysis. It is this transnational arrangement that has caused home university lecturers to reflect upon what exactly makes a 'good' teacher or learner, raising questions about the appropriateness of Western educational discourses for Asian contexts and prompting reflection upon research reporting so-called 'Asian' approaches to teaching and learning. It is the students on

this course, and how they make meaning from their teaching and learning experiences that are the focus of the research being reported in this article.

2. Literature review and theoretical preliminaries

One of the first researchers to document the specific learning strategies of a 'good learner' was Rubin (1975, p. 48) when she detailed the characteristics of a good language learner. Good language learners, according to her, were 'willing and accurate guessers', driven to communicate, not inhibited, focused on form, motivated to practise, prepared to monitor his or her own speech and the speech of others and attentive to meaning.

Whilst Rubin was prepared to admit that 'there are lots of other things which the good learner does' (p. 48) and that 'the learning strategies (of even successful learners) will vary with the task, the learning stage, the age of the learner, the context, the individual style and cultural differences in cognitive learning styles' (p.49), the concept of a tangible 'good learner' (and teacher), who behaves in a way which reflects current Western learning theory, still prevails. Similarly, notions of what constitutes the 'good' teacher have ranged from dogmatic lists of effective teacher characteristics and practices (Hamachek, 1969) to debates about what characteristics define good teachers (Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004) and searches for the 'essence' of good teaching through a more holistic approach to teacher education (Korthagen, 2004). Moreover, 'The Good Teacher' has become part of a discussion which suggests that we need to be aware of dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education (Moore, 2004). In particular, some reserachers have suggested that the promotion of so-called 'ideal' learner/teacher qualities and strategies across teaching and learning environments has created what could be termed a hegemony of social, cultural and ideological practices (Nozaki, 2009) and a tendency towards 'Othering' of practices not in tune with the dominant beliefs. Othering of the 'Asian learner' and the Asian teacher can reflect

Western-oriented perceptions of 'Asian education' as somehow deficient when compared with Western approaches to education. In many cases a picture is painted of the education system of the Other as 'backward', 'traditional' (in the sense of tradition being a burden), 'imposing' and 'didactic' (Phan, 2004, p. 50). This was especially true of educational and applied linguistics research in the past which tended to essentialise Asian students as having different attitudes to learning from those of their Western counterparts. For example, in the 1970s, a common view was that Asians were more dependent on memorisation and authority and less able to think independently (Noesjirwan, 1970, p393) than their Western counterparts. More recently, in the 1990s, researchers reported that Asian students appeared to lack abstract or critical thinking skills, have constraints on behaviour due to issues of 'face' (i.e. passivity), emphasise the concrete (which stifles creativity) and have a compulsion to please the group (Chan, 1999). Many researchers have documented these responses (Grimshaw, 2007; Holliday, 2005; Phan Le Ha, 2004).

Even more recently, Louie (2005) has reported that Western teachers have internalised the idea that, due to their Western culture, Westerners are more assertive, independent and socially adept than many people with Asian backgrounds. Western approaches to teaching and learning and the theories underlying these approaches are often seen as superior to those emanating from Asia. Kramsch refers to these as 'sedimented representations' (Kramsch, 2009, p. 246) of Asian teaching and learning.

The following study attempted to give a voice to the Vietnamese English language teachers enrolled in the MA Applied linguistics course as postgraduate students. These teachers often find themselves having to 'bounce back between the two rivers' according to one respondent in the study (NI25). They are in the unenviable position of having been

'enlightened' by current Western educational theory and practice only to return to classrooms in which conditions dictate against the implementation of many of the practices thought to be ideal for learning. Furthermore, they have developed perspectives of their own with regard to what constitutes good teaching and learning and understand, from first-hand experience, the rationale behind many approaches to learning attributed to Asians. These responses, reflections, insights and narratives constitute the substance of this article.

3. Research design and methods

The case study reported in this article attempted to draw a fairly detailed picture of a group of people in some depth (Punch, 2005, p.144) and was conducted across two different sites (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). It was designed to investigate the world views of the participants, how they live, work and make subjective meanings of their experiences. A qualitative research method was adopted (Cresswell, 2012) with a naturalistic paradigm selected over a positivist paradigm because of the nature of the research question and the belief by the researcher that realities are holistic, constructed and multiple, interacting in a state of 'mutual simultaneous shaping' without any separation between the knower and what is known (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). Qualitative approaches also encourage 'holistic', open-ended and integrated overviews of the situation and allow for many interpretations, with data able to be displayed in original forms - word clusters or informant narratives from 'deep within' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6). The study was also aligned with postmodern interpretivist - interactionist approaches which try to keep voices, emotions and actions of informants in context and focus on revealing informants' 'self-concept' and 'emotions' as well as notions of 'power', and 'ideology' (Denzin, 1992, p.74). The reflections of postgraduate students from one site only (Vietnam) are reported in this article.

Participants were Vietnamese postgraduate students from one site only, all experienced English language teachers, aged between 20 and

45, of both genders, enrolled in the one-year, eightunit, coursework MA (Applied Linguistics) and living in and around Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Reflections offered by the lecturers of these students were not included here.

Semi-structured individual interviews, conducted via purposive sampling, were used to gather reflections and responses to the following interview questions and were recorded on a digital recorder then transcribed:

1. How have theories of teaching and learning established mostly in the West influenced your views on teaching and learning?
2. What does the 'good' teacher do in your opinion?
3. What does the 'good' learner do in your opinion?
4. Are you familiar with / aware of the theories of teaching and learning attributed to the 'Asian learner'?
5. How would you respond to these theories about the 'Asian learner'?

4. Findings

The influence of Western educational discourses

There appeared to be mixed feelings toward Western educational theory and practices. Respondents mentioned 'good relationships' with students, inspiration to search for new teaching styles and good approaches to teaching which help learners to learn in their positive feedback. One respondent lamented the prevailing focus on grammar teaching in Vietnamese classrooms.

On the less positive side, respondents shared the fact that they felt a lot of pressure to teach in ways dictated to them by outside bodies. Although they admitted liking the new style of 'active' teaching being proposed by educational theorists in the West, they found it difficult to carry out in Vietnamese educational settings. Textbooks advocating a 'communicative approach' often fall short of being applicable to high school settings, they

said, with students being too tired and lethargic to participate or just plain antisocial in their behaviour and constrained by the desire to be 'humble' and not 'show off'. In many cases Western educational theory remained just that in Vietnam, 'theory', as teachers were unable to apply it. Another confirmed this by stating that he just taught in a way that he thought was right.

The 'good' teacher

Comments about good teaching could be grouped together under four super-ordinate headings: teacher being, teacher knowing, teacher giving and teacher doing, although there were many instances when this categorisation was blurred. Respondents' comments fell fairly evenly into all of these categories.

Teacher being

Vietnamese postgraduate respondents mentioned the importance of teacher 'self-confidence', 'competence' and humour for effective teaching while several respondents felt that a 'good' teacher should show empathy with his or her students, have (positive) feelings for them and 'care enough about each' of them. Strictness was also a requirement of a 'good' teacher according to some. Teachers need to have 'principles' and be 'consistent', 'fixed' but at the same time adapt to different groups of students for example, 'moody' teenagers. They need to be 'inclusive' not just with the extrovert students but with 'the quiet' and 'not very sociable students'.

Teacher knowing

There was a shared understanding by respondents that good teachers also need to 'know', not only their subject but their students' needs, scores, level and learning styles.

Teacher doing

Good teaching practice was identified by respondents as the provision of 'enjoyable activities', a 'good teaching style' and manner and adaptation of the syllabus to the group and circumstances. One respondent narrated her experience as follows:

Yeah, I have some teenager classes and they are very moody. Sometime they want to cry, sometime they want to sit, stay and read,

sometime they just want to listen all the time, sometime they want to speak with their friends.... Sometime I have two classes for ... for one same subject in one week, ah, and the syllabus that, um, from the first class I need to do A and B, and sometime I switch it, I say, "We'll do A and C today". B and D for the second one, because I fear that the students will have more motivations for A and C rather than A and B (HA44).

One facet of a 'good' teacher, which was mentioned by a few respondents, was the role of the teacher in making students feel 'comfortable' and in 'love' with the teacher. As one respondent commented, 'I think in Vietnam, if the student love the teacher they will like learning, yeah'. The 'good' teacher 'builds a good relationship' with the students and doesn't remain 'mysterious'. One respondent claimed that she couldn't learn from the 'mysterious' 'Vietnamese' teachers, especially 'the old ones' as she was 'scared' of them.

Teacher giving

Finally, the 'good' teacher was reported as 'giving' encouragement to students and providing strategies to help them study independently and teach themselves as well as avoid the dangers that life generally has to offer. As one respondent detailed, 'Yeah, strategies... The right way to... to do... to get what we want, and the right way or the way for the thing to avoid some of the evil, yeah'.

The 'good' learner

The characteristics of the 'good' learner, according to Vietnamese postgraduate participants in the study, again mostly fell under two headings: personality traits and learning strategies. The table below summarises and dichotomises the responses in the full knowledge that the two categories are by no means mutually exclusive or neatly dichotomous but in an attempt to simplify, and make digestible, respondents' ideas.

The 'Good' Learner	
Personality traits (innate)	Strategies (tactics)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • friendly • sociable • extrovert • honest – tells the teacher if something is wrong • independent thinking • hard working • attentive in class • curious to discover (even outside class) • willing to learn (not just for parents) • devoted to learning not just scores • loves to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gets knowledge themselves • goes ahead, does not wait in class • knows how to get started, creates own way • studies and practices • completes assignments • believes in the teacher and has a good relationship with the teacher • cooperates with the teacher and helps the teacher to motivate other students • may disagree with the teacher (doesn't act like a puppet) • asks questions • never does anything against humanity i.e. for money; knows when to stop

Table 1: The 'Good' learner according to offshore Vietnamese postgraduate students at the Vietnam site

Respondents saw personal characteristics as equally as important as good learning strategies for becoming a 'good' learner although, as mentioned earlier, the two, of course, are not necessarily dichotomous, with personal characteristics influencing strategy choice. Respondents mentioned many strategies which would be considered the repertoire of the 'good' learner in current educational practice in the West and there was little credit given to strategies more traditionally associated with Asian learning styles such as memorisation, obedience, hard work on the whole.

'Asian' approaches to learning

Participants' comments fell into three main overlapping areas: rote-learning/memorisation; learner passivity and critical thinking skills. Within each of the areas respondents either agreed that this was a common strategy, agreed but with certain reservations or disagreed entirely.

Rote-learning/memorisation

Most respondents agreed that memorisation and rote-learning were learning strategies which were endorsed in the Vietnamese educational system with teachers encouraging these strategies by awarding higher marks to students who submitted exams or assignments which reproduced their input 'word for word' and designing tests which created rote learners. One respondent attributed this strategy to the indirect influence of Confucius. Another respondent felt that this strategy was sanctioned largely because Vietnamese teachers were used to teaching in this way and fearful of teaching in any other way with 'policy makers', 'the system' and teachers intent on forcing 'students to learn by heart'. It was noted, by one respondent, however, that Vietnamese students' styles were changing if they were living abroad in places like the United States or Australia while Vietnamese students, still resident in Vietnam, 'refer what the teacher tells them to do, like

rote learning'. Respondents who agreed that rote-learning and memorisation were still very common learning styles in Vietnam very often also added that they thought this was the case because of 'inactive' teachers and creativity being hindered by testing.

Some respondents did not feel that the image of Asian learners as rote-learners was entirely true. A common understanding was that students relied very much on this strategy at primary school level but much less so at higher education level. Amounts of memorisation required varied with the subject the student was enrolled in, with subjects such as Communist ideology being taught in a way which relies on rote-learning by very strict teachers who enforce this practice. Many respondents felt that the amount of rote-learning done by students was dependent upon the aptitude and abilities of the student.

An interesting comment by one respondent put rote learning down to the age and amount of money students possessed. If they were older and wealthier they were less inclined to rely on rote-learning as much perhaps due to the different styles of teaching they encountered in private educational settings both in Vietnam and overseas or the confidence that comes with being older, secure, well - travelled and financially stable. He is quoted below:

Um, because my students are teenagers and they have come from the wealthy families, so they've got lots of experience from travelling around, moving from country to country so they are very independent thinkers, so they are not, ah, very traditional Vietnamese learners ... (TO64)

Passivity

Almost half of the respondents agreed that they had found their Asian students to be passive in lessons. One respondent felt that students had been particularly passive when she was a student in previous years. Respondents attributed this 'passivity' to four main causes: student ability (especially language ability), student laziness, funding (personal or government) and didactic teaching style. The comment about passivity being linked with 'other social problems' was the

most insightful for this researcher and is quoted below:

Just because they don't have the environment to show it out. Um, we cannot provide them with the correct, ah, you know, situation for them to do the right way. Um, it's also because of the financial problems also, we don't have enough school for them so we cannot split the classes into smaller groups. Usually high school now still have 50, 30, even with the gifted class we have 35 students. I was part of a class like that and I can see that. So it connects to other social [problems] ... (HA59)

Some respondents agreed that Vietnamese learners were passive but only to a certain extent. One respondent was very specific and stated that about half of her students were passive in her classes and she thought that was because they were 'a bit shy'. Another respondent felt that students were quite passive orally but very 'active' when responses were written down. There was also a feeling that this 'passivity' was changing with the new generation.

Respondents who maintained that Vietnamese students were not passive in classes gave several reasons for this viewpoint. Firstly, they argued that students were not innately passive but had been trained to be like this by their teachers. Secondly, they maintained that Vietnamese people generally do not initiate conversation in certain situations anyway as it is not their 'custom' or 'language habit' but if the teacher has the 'appropriate topic' then students will be motivated to cooperate.

Similarly, one respondent commented that Vietnamese people keep their feelings and emotions to themselves in everyday life, trying to express themselves in a different way so their classroom behaviour is a subset of their behaviour outside the classroom not necessarily 'passive' classroom behaviour. Finally, one respondent claimed that Asian characteristics were not particularly Asian but 'situation bound', just as Western behaviours arise from

Western contexts and ‘Western people ... adopt Western styles’.

Critical thinking

Many respondents felt that research portraying Asian students as fairly uncritical in their approach to learning was accurate. Reasons for this fell into two categories: outside influences and inside influences. Asian educational background and family upbringing constituted the outside influences while student personal characteristics made up the inside influences. Respondents commented that students in classes in Asia (and Vietnam in particular) were taught to ‘listen’ and ‘obey’ by their teachers with critical thinking not only neglected but teachers actively discouraging any kind of questioning or critical thinking by giving low marks if assignment work did not reproduce what they had said word for word. As a result about 70% of Vietnamese students handed teachers back their own words as one student commented:

Since, um, elementary school, the teacher give them everything. Everything, and they want them to follow exactly the right ... that way. They don’t want them to do anything different.... If there is something creative outside of the form, then maybe they receive very low score on that (HI42).

Any natural inclination towards speculative or analytic thinking is hindered by Asian teachers according to several respondents with so much time spent on memorising that there is little time left for higher order thinking skills. Learners are scared of their teachers or ‘over respect’ them. Children are socialised about the inappropriateness of criticism from a very early age in Vietnamese families and it is ‘in [their] blood’ not to criticise anyone, especially within the family but to ‘think... good about someone’.

Another respondent felt that any reluctance on the part of Asian learners to think critically was down to their lack of sufficient knowledge or life experience which made it impossible for them to disagree with what is presented to them while another stated that she thought that the Vietnamese students were just plain lazy.

Some respondents were not as convinced of

the unwillingness of Asian learners to be critical in their approach, adding that some were quite active in thinking even while others held back. Furthermore, one respondent felt that young people in Asian countries had become more critical due to the influence of Western movies and television and the increase in likelihood of working alongside foreign or ex-patriot workers.

Several other respondents did not agree that Asian students were less critical in their approach than Western students. They believed that they were critical but unable to articulate this, partly because of language difficulties if the subject was in a second language. Furthermore, they felt that learners would involve themselves in higher order thinking and adapt to the new situation if encouraged to do so by teachers. Finally, a couple of respondents argued that critical thinking and discussion does take place outside the classroom especially with friends.

5. Conclusions

While respondents reported, overall, that they had benefited from Western educational discourses, they also bemoaned the fact that there was a mismatch between ideas and practice with most theory remaining at the level of theory due to practical constraints. The pressure to move to so-called ‘Western’ approaches to teaching, despite the impracticalities of this move, often put considerable pressure on Vietnamese teachers.

The strong message coming through from respondents was that the personal qualities of teachers are at least as important as the methodologies they employ. The ‘good’ teacher is sensitive to student needs, has feelings for the student and empathises with him or her, making a comfortable atmosphere. Similarly, it is the teachers’ role to create a close relationship with students and guide them in life generally. Students, on the other hand, should be devoted to learning, not just the attainment of marks, and willing to cooperate with the teacher.

The feeling was that many of the

approaches to learning associated with education in Asia are apparent to some extent in their own teaching environments. However, it is dangerous to see these approaches as innate traits of Asians themselves as they are much more likely to be 'situation bound' with different strategies being utilised in different subjects or at different levels of education. There are many contributing factors to the perpetuation of these teaching and learning styles, namely physical environments, economic constraints, test driven systems, qualities, abilities,

knowledge, experience, confidence of the teacher, qualities, abilities, knowledge, experience, confidence, age, socioeconomic status of the learner and cultural expectations. The important thing to realise is that the situation is a dynamic with approaches to learning changing rapidly due to the influence of Western educational discourses, local government responses, media, globalisation and the capacity of Asian students to adapt to any new learning environment.

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