

THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM: A DISCUSSION FROM SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, English is the most widely spoken language in the world, serving different purposes such as education, commerce, and tourism and culture exchange. Due to its spread, English no longer belongs to native speakers but become a common lingua franca across the globe. Wherein, an important question arises here, should variants of English be officially introduced in the Vietnamese context and in which feasible teaching orientations?

Keywords: Future, English language teaching, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English has become a world language and is the language most widely used and taught in the world these days. It is no longer the circumstance that the English language is used by people from Korea, Thailand, or Switzerland just to negotiate with the American, British, or Australian. Conversely, it is increasingly used by people from Asia to interact with those from Europe, and people from South America to interact with people from Africa, etc. To put simply, in this rapidly changing world, there are more non-native speakers of English than native speakers due to the fast growing international business.

Vietnam has currently been the member of numerous international organizations such as Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN); World Trade Organization (WTO); or Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC); and so on. In these communities, Vietnamese people who are not born as English speakers have learned English language in order to be able to

“survive”. In other words, English is used throughout these communities as *lingua franca*, “the common language used by people of different language backgrounds to communicate with each other” (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 7) [1]. Consequently, this author advocates that the English language has shifted from being a language that was primarily utilized to serve native speakers’ communal purposes to becoming an international medium in *lingua franca* communication.

In Vietnam, yet, only the traditional varieties of British English and American English which are deemed to be native varieties and spoken by native speakers have been officially introduced and taught to Vietnamese learners. It is evidently proved by English language teaching materials and resources, especially a series of the English textbooks from Grade 6 to Grade 12 compiled by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. Given the fact that English as an international language is heterogeneous with multiple norms, each coming into play at different levels and contexts

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of social interaction (Zacharias & Manara, 2013) [2]; thus, should other varieties of English like Australian English, Indian English or Singaporean English, etc. be concurrently introduced to Vietnamese learners these days? And which teaching orientations should be implemented in response to this present case? By nature of a reflective paper, these questions will be answered by a discussion from the socio-cultural perspective.

2. Discussion

2.1. Status of the English language in Vietnam in the past and now

During its 4000 years of civilization, Vietnam has expanded from a small province in the mountainous North, gradually expanding southward to become a strong, growing economy with a total population of nearly 90 million. During this period, Vietnam has been directly influenced by such powers as China, France, the Soviet Union and the United States of America respectively (Le Thanh Son, 2011) [3]. Concurrently with this, Chinese, French, Russian, and English were the languages respectively introduced in Vietnam. According to Nguyen Thi Ngan (2012) [4], due to historical backgrounds, English did not become popular in Vietnam until the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implementation of DoiMoi (i.e., economic reforms) and the normalization of US-Vietnam relations. English once lost its place in the foreign language curriculum when the Vietnam War ended, now has been back and proved its pivotal

role in the course of foreign cooperation, international integration, modernization and socioeconomic enhancement of the nation. In the paper of Dewey and Leung (2010) [5], they described that

Conventionally, the distribution of English around the world is described in relation to three main groups of users: 1) those who speak English as a native language (ENL); 2) speakers of English as a second language (ESL); and 3) speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL). A further means of classification is Kachru's well-known concentric circles model (e.g. Kachru, 1992), according to which countries are classified as 'Inner Circle', 'Outer Circle' or 'Expanding Circle' which largely correspond respectively to the ENL/ESL/EFL distinction (p. 2).

To make it clear, countries in the Inner Circle include the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Countries in the Outer Circle include India, Singapore, and the Philippines. Countries listed as being in the Expanding Circle include China, Korea, Japan and Russia or/ and Vietnam. It goes without saying that English has appeared and existed in Vietnam as a foreign language, not native or second language, in which "English is not actually used or spoken very much in the normal course of daily life" [1, p. 27], but is typically learned at school. Inferentially, the phrase "foreign language" is au-

tomatically attributed to “English” for many Vietnamese.

Nowadays, there are different foreign languages to be taught in Vietnam such as English, Chinese, French, Russian, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Italian, etc.; however, English has become the principal foreign language specified in most programs of universities, junior colleges and vocational schools. Moreover, hundreds of English centers have been established throughout Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City alone has approximately 300 language centers, attracting both children and adult learners aiming to secure a better future or employment with international affiliations that are booming in the country. In general, the high status of English as a foreign language in present Vietnam is obvious. This is attached to the fact that “those who do not have sufficient competency in English may have a feeling of being excluded from positions which may lead to power” [6, p. 17].

2.2. Vietnamese culture’s influence on the use and the teaching orientation of English

To another aspect, with regard to the interplay of language acquisition and culture, Brown (1994) emphasizes “a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” [7, p. 164]. With L1 learners immersed in their own culture, connections between language and culture of-

ten never come to question. However, for L2 learners, the impact of learners’ own culture on their foreign language learning is actually complex in which both teachers and learners need to adjust their foreign language acquisition based upon their own cultural conventions. Therefore, there is no doubt to advocate that for both English teaching-learning and English using in Vietnam, the Vietnamese culture influences these processes. Below are some typical examples:

Example 1: In Vietnamese culture, it is customary to greet people by asking the equivalent of “Where are you going?” or “Have you eaten?” This cultural convention will be reflected in using English in Vietnam to produce “Where are you going?” or “Have you eaten?” as a normal greeting. Interestingly, this may be called Vietnamese English.

Example 2: Formality, respect, and interpersonal harmony are cultural values evident in verbal communication among Vietnamese. To avoid the signs of disrespect, especially with persons of higher status, Vietnamese people tend to express disagreement within euphemism. To support this point, during verbal communication in English, Vietnamese students are asked to use some expressions to convey their disagreement as following: *a. I’m sorry to disagree with you, but.....; b. Yes, but don’t you think; c. That’s not the same thing at all; d. I’m afraid I have to disagree; e. I’m not so sure about that.*

Moreover, Vietnamese learners usually nod and use the word “yes” or “yah” to show respect and indicate that they are listening or concentrating on, although they may not understand. That is something about Vietnamese culture’s impact on the way Vietnamese people use English. And how have Vietnamese socio-cultural values influenced English language teaching-learning in Vietnam? After more than one thousand years of Chinese domination, Vietnamese cultural value, especially the nature of education in Vietnam is strongly influenced by Chinese ideologies and religious beliefs, namely Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Nguyen Tuong Hung, 2002) [8], dominated by a teacher-centered, grammar-translation method and emphasis on rote memorization (Liu & Littlewood, 1997, as cited in Phan Thi Thu Huong, 2008 [9]):

1. In traditional Grammar-Translation classes of English, the teacher is the authority in the classroom transmitting grammar points deductively, while students only memorize and spend most of their time on grammatical and lexical exercises. They are rather quiet in class and seldom volunteer to express their ideas or to contribute to the lesson, let alone asking question to the teachers;

2. In the Audio-Lingual Method classes, teacher-learner interaction also embodies Vietnamese traditional culture where students first listen to their teacher’s model, then repeat.

However, given the rolling wheel of international communication, currently, Vietnam has gradually approached many other methods like Communicative Language Teaching, or Task-based Learning, etc. so as to help Vietnamese learners to be able to genuinely communicate in the target language, namely English.

2.3. The future trends of English language teaching in Vietnam: Standard English or localized English?

In light of the globalization of English, exposure to varieties of English (e.g. American English, British English, Australia English, or Singaporean English, etc.) is believed to necessarily facilitate learners’ communication abilities when being confronted with diverse types of English uses and users (Matsuda, 2003) [10]. Additionally, she claims that limited exposure to varieties of English may cause learners to resist linguistic variations or form the ideas of confusion when they encounter different types of English uses and users in authentic contexts. To give an example, the ways people greet each other in British, American and Australian English respectively may differ in remarkable ways:

British English: How are you?

American English: How are you doing?

Australian English: How are you going?

British people who move to live in Australia can be confused by being asked “How are you going?” by an Australian, as, in certain contexts, a sensible answer might well be to say

“By bus” (Kirkpatrick, 2007) [1]. Apparently, in case Vietnamese learners are not exposed to varieties of English, it is impossible for them to survive in this *lingua franca* community.

In Vietnamese pedagogical context, until most recently, only two varieties of English have been widely accepted and used in Vietnam, especially by Vietnam’s government and teachers, comprising of British English and American English. For most Vietnamese people, these two varieties of English are asserted as “Standard English” which is used by educated people in all English-speaking countries (Howatt, 2004, as cited in Dewey & Leung, 2010 [5]). Of course, English language teaching materials and resources, especially a series of English textbooks from Grade 6 to Grade 12 compiled by Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training have been compiled according to “Standard English”, namely American English and British English. However, the spread of English as an international language has changed our conception of both the language and how it should be taught. With more nonnative than native speakers of English, the ownership of English has shifted and new world Englishes have emerged. Furthermore, at present, Vietnam is participating in several international organizations such as ASEAN, WTO, APEC, etc.; welcoming a huge number of foreign investors and visitors come here for travel and business, particularly China, Japan, Korea, India, Singapore, Thailand, the Philip-

pinas, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, so on. All of them use English as a means of communication with their localized English, which can be labeled as Thai English, Filipino English, Japanese English, so on. Therefore, British English and American English are not sufficient for Vietnamese people to serve non-native speakers’ various communicative purposes. So what are the future trends of English language teaching in Vietnam with regard to what kinds of English should be preferred? Some predictions may be as following:

- “Standard English” – British English and American English – may still be prevalent in most English language teaching programs of Vietnam, especially in the Vietnamese public educational system; also, it continues to appear in language teaching materials and resources in the near future with the aim of helping students to master some international examinations (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC, etc.) for their study and work;

- At the same time, new varieties of English such as Thai English, Filipino English, Japanese English, or Singaporean English will probably be paid more attention gradually so that Vietnamese learners could survive with different multilingual communities since the fact that an exposure to various English systems is deemed to necessarily assure learners’ communicative competence when being faced with diverse types of English usages and users” (Matsuda, 2003). Most re-

cently, Vietnam, particular Ho Chi Minh City has hired some Filipino teachers of English to teach English language for primary students of Vietnam. This reflects the fact that Vietnam has much or less opened its mind with new language policies and that Vietnamese experts “recognize that English is presented by a range of varieties which have developed in Asia” [1, p. 108];

- Given the changing globalization of English, and the demand of international communication, Vietnam’s government and educators certainly have some positive changes in relation to English language teaching methodology and materials as well as beliefs. A decisive shift from teacher-centered methods to student-centered ones besides appropriate teaching approaches is a typical example of the future trends of English language teaching in the Vietnamese environment.

3. Implications for English language teaching in Vietnam

Nowadays, English is recognized as an international language, with nonnative speakers of English outnumbering native speakers. This global spread requires not only a shift in our conception of English, but also a shift in English language teaching practice including teaching approaches, materials and pedagogical beliefs as well. This paper will end by suggesting some pedagogical guidelines necessary for English language learners in Vietnam who primarily use English as a foreign language to interact with speakers from

different first languages and cultural backgrounds in their daily lives, which are in agreement with Matsuda (2003) [10], Kirkpatrick (2007) [1], Foley (2012) [11], and Jindapitak and Teo (2013) [12]:

- The changing pedagogical priorities suggest that both English teachers and learners should focus on language awareness rather than grammatical correctness in a single variety; strategies of communication rather than mastery of product-orientated rules (Matsuda, 2003) [10];

- Implementing language teaching methodologies should fit local cultural values; and there should be a suitable modification of teachers’ and students’ roles in English classrooms to manifest learning outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 2007 [1]; Foley, 2012 [11]). Put it simply, teachers should provide students with appropriate strategies for their active practice in the language classrooms, that is, a teacher’s responsibility is to facilitate the change, and students become autonomous.

- Moreover, a variation of English language is natural, normal and continuous; therefore, English language teaching professionals in Vietnam must establish their tolerance and understanding of variation (Kirkpatrick, 2007) [1]. It literally means that the teachers do not need to focus much on their students’ errors but encourage them to develop their communicative strategies confidently and naturally;

▪ Thanks to the advent of information technology, countless Internet sources (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, etc.) supply millions of speech specimens of speakers around the globe who have different English tongues. According to Jindapitak and Teo (2013), teachers can take the advance of this technological availability by incorporating authentic audios of world Englishes available on hundreds of online sources (e.g. news, radio, films) into classroom materials so that students have an opportunity to be exposed to wider varieties of English. Nevertheless, there are still some challenges from different sources such as institutions, teachers and learners.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in the Vietnamese context, English language still remains its stable status as a foreign language used preferably rather than other foreign languages like French, Chinese, Korea, Japanese, etc. However, nowadays English no longer belongs to native speakers but has become a common *lingua franca* across the globe, which is “the most widely used and widely learned language in societies outside its original home” [11, p. 188]. Hence, both Standard English and other varieties of Eng-

lish locally labeled as Australia English, India English, and Singaporean English, etc. should be introduced to Vietnamese learners at the same time in order to help them sustain their communication in multilingual communities. Concurrently, “the obsolete English language teaching paradigms, which are based on the ideology that native speakers are the authority of the language, need to be replaced by a newer paradigm that relates language classroom to the world and takes into account local adaptation or appropriation” [12, p. 197]. To respond it, language classrooms in Vietnamese pedagogical setting need to equip English language learners with skills and authentic materials that can help them not only to effectively perform in linguistic activities but also to become effective international speakers who are aware of the diversified contexts of English. By providing a collection of texts by non-native authors, by catalyzing possibilities for communication with future *lingua franca* users and generally by promoting learners to be listeners and performers, teachers can both build up the practicality of their classrooms and open the opportunities of *lingua franca* interactions.

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TƯƠNG LAI DẠY HỌC NGÔN NGỮ TIẾNG ANH TẠI VIỆT NAM: THẢO LUẬN TỪ GÓC NHÌN VĂN HÓA XÃ HỘI

TÓM TẮT

Ngày nay, tiếng Anh trở thành ngôn ngữ được sử dụng rộng rãi nhất trên toàn thế giới, phục vụ nhiều mục đích khác nhau như giáo dục, thương mại, du lịch hay giao lưu văn hóa. Do sự mở rộng này, tiếng Anh không còn là ngôn ngữ riêng của người bản xứ mà trở thành ngôn ngữ chung trên toàn cầu. Chính vì vậy, câu hỏi đặt ra liệu các biến thể tiếng Anh có nên được dạy chính thức ở Việt Nam hay không và định hướng dạy như thế nào.

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(Received: 8/7/2017, Revised: 10/2/2018, Accepted for publication: 24/12/2018)