Language and Vietnamese Pedagogical Contexts

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Introduction

The economic open-door policy pursued by the Government of Vietnam has increased the demand for English-speaking people who are expected to be competent to communicate verbally with the outside world and to access technology. English has been made compulsory in the secondary school curriculum. Moreover, in 1995, the Prime Minister issued a Decree, according to which personnel working in Government agencies have to be able to communicate in English.

Despite the importance of English in the new social context, English language teaching in Vietnam, due to its low quality, has yet to match the demand for competent English-speaking people. New teacher training programs — pre-service and in-service alike — are designed and delivered with a focus on training communicative teachers in a bid to address the fault of teaching methodologies. Unfortunately, not much improvement in terms of teaching methods has been noticed in English classes. During the training courses, Vietnamese teachers show great interest in new methodologies, but after they return from those courses, they continue teaching in their own way, using traditional methods. This fact gives rise to the need to question the appropriateness and relevancy of communicative language teaching developed in another part of the world to Vietnamese pedagogical contexts.

The communicative approach is discussed here with reference to Canale and Swain’s (1980) construct of communicative competence, which is made up of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In this paper, I discuss to what degree such a communicative approach fits Vietnamese pedagogical contexts on the basis of an analysis of three factors: first, Vietnamese learner’s communicative needs; second, Vietnamese classroom culture and discourse, and third, the constraints on the teacher in teaching English communicatively. The conclusions I will draw are that the pedagogical contexts in Vietnam are both supportive of and constraining to communicative teaching practices and that to make English language teaching responsive to the needs of Vietnam there should be some macro-changes as well as the methodological mediation of the use of the communicative approach.

Communicative needs of Vietnamese learners

The recent economic renovation or doi moi in Vietnam has given foreign language the status as a key to its regional and global participation. Foreign language now is a compulsory school subject and one of the six national examinations that students have to pass if they want to get the Secondary School Education Certificate. Although schools offer either English or French, many students opt for English due to their perception that a high proficiency in English may offer more opportunities for employment, and also due to the fact that English is ‘in fashion’ among young people. School students who come from cities, apart from the examinations, need either to
speak ‘survival English’ to understand pop songs or to use some formulaic expressions in English to help their parents with some small business transactions.

At the tertiary level, English is taught as a minor subject in the training programme. There are also some colleges and universities where English is the major, and students learn English to become teachers, translators and/or interpreters. College or university students are better motivated to learn English because they can find a good job with their command of English and because colleges and universities are based in cities where students can have access to more input of the target language. If these students, upon graduation, can find jobs which require communicative ability in English, they tend to use English with other non-native speakers from ASEAN countries, and from countries like Japan, Hong Kong and Korea more often than they do with native British, Americans or Australians in their working environments. It is difficult for Vietnamese speakers to achieve the sociolinguistic competence defined by Canale and Swain (1980) because the target sociolinguistic conventions are unknown to them. On the other hand, they do not necessarily have to achieve this competence in such a social context.

Vietnamese learners obviously differ in their purpose for learning English. In general, students of English in Vietnam fall into three major categories in terms of needs. Some view English as a tool for more attractive and lucrative employment opportunities; others need a good knowledge of English to study further at universities or colleges. The majority of students, however, learn English just to pass the national examinations. These students do not have an obvious communicative need. All they need is a sufficiently good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the target language to pass the national grammar-based and norm-referenced examinations.

Currently, the two most important English examinations in Vietnam are the school final examination and the university entrance examination. Both are administered at the end of Grade 12, and neither has a Listening and Speaking component. While the former is norm-referenced, the latter is designed to discriminate between candidates who will be admitted into college or university and those who will not.

Holliday (1994) argues that “in order to be appropriate, English language teaching methodologies need therefore to be finely tuned to the various needs of individual classroom cultures: they need to be appropriate to local cultures in very specific terms” (p. 53). Canale and Swain (1980) also argue that “a communicative approach must be based on and respond to the learner’s communicative needs” (p. 27). Unquestionably, learners’ needs vary, depending on the external exposure to the target language and their personal motivation. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate how much communication Vietnamese learners need before decisions on teaching methodology are made.

The English learning environment in Vietnam is described as a cultural island where the teacher is expected to be the sole provider of experience in the target language. Due to the lack of exposure to the target language and the pressure to pass the examinations, the affective filter is high for most Vietnamese students. This is obviously demonstrated by their lack of motivation and high level of anxiety, manifest in a fear of failure in exams. Their learning motivation actually depends largely on the “teacher’s initiative” and the “learner’s will to succeed” (Ellis, 1996). This explains partly why Vietnamese teachers focus more on language knowledge than language use, and more on receptive skills than productive skills. In this environment, “it is valid to ask how much communicative competence one needs to teach” (Paulston, 1990: 291). The
requirement to provide learners with “the opportunity to take part in meaningful communication interaction with highly competent speakers of the language, i.e. to respond to genuine communicative needs in realistic second language situations” (Canale and Swain, 1980: 27) is unrealistic and impracticable in Vietnamese settings.

Vietnamese classroom culture and discourse

Vietnamese society is typically characterized as a collectivist society. The class is one ‘family’ where students study and play together. The friendships they make during years at school is significant and it lasts many years after they have left school. This is different from western individualist societies. The educational system of Vietnam is characterized as a closed system and knowledge-centred. The textbook, the syllabus and the teacher determine the knowledge to be acquired. Underpinned by the behaviourist stimulus-response pattern, this educational system expects the students to ‘return’ the desired behavior, which is assessed by examinations.

Central to pedagogical practices in Vietnam is the traditional view of the teacher-student relationship. This view supports teacher-centred methods and a structured curriculum. The teacher is supposed to be the only provider of knowledge and therefore is highly respected by the students, students’ parents, and the society as a whole. What the teacher or the textbook says is unquestionably standard norms. This respect for teachers is reflected in the following traditional verse:

\[
\text{Muôn sang thi bắc cầu kiến} \\
\text{Muôn con hay chì phải yêu lấy thầy}
\]

(To get across the river, you have to build a bridge, to have well-educated children, you have to respect the teacher).

A common motto that can be read on the front of every school building is “Tien hoc le hau hoc van”, or “First learn how to behave, then learn the subject”. Teachers maintain such a high profile in their function as the norm of knowledge, wisdom, and behavior that they do not accept their role as “instruments to see that learning takes place” (Medgyes, 1986).

In Vietnam, English language teachers are subject teachers whose responsibility is to provide students with knowledge about the English language and to develop the knowledge of the English language in the most effective possible way. Education is considered ‘a ticket to ride’ and certificates are more important than competence. Failure in exams is viewed as academic incompetence, and, therefore, a face-losing misfortune. Not only do students find it critical to pass the examinations, teachers are also very much concerned about the pass rate of their students, since they are assessed on their students’ performance in public examinations, rather than on the quality of their teaching. As a result, no matter what the learning purpose of the students might be, teachers have to make sure that their students achieve a high pass rate in the examinations. This examination-oriented instruction produces students who may “achieve the highest scores in the examinations but fail to show their excellence in real-life performance” (Tuy, 1999).

The main emphasis of the communicative approach is to develop the learner’s communicative competence through the “negotiation of meaning”. The communicative classroom seeks to encourage learners to initiate and participate actively in meaningful
interaction. Breen and Candlin (1980) say that participation in the negotiation of meaning enables learners to interpret and construct meanings for themselves and this is the expression of genuine and meaningful use of the target language. Vietnamese students, except for those coming from cities, are slow in adapting to the participatory approach to education on account of their traditional passiveness (Linh, 1999). An examination of classroom discourse reveals that classes are teacher-centred and teacher-led. Learning follows the hierarchy of first listening to the teacher, then repetition, then copying models (Kennett and Knight, 1999). Classroom interaction is largely one-way, either between the teacher and individual student or between the teacher and the whole class. When one particular student is responding to the teacher, others do not listen. They have their own business to attend to. The traditional analytical learning style informs both the teacher and learners that it is safe to learn and memorize rules. “The preponderance of this activity limits other types of practice activities” (Kennett and Knight, 1999) in the language classroom. Interruption, argument, seeking clarification, and challenging others rarely happen during the class time. By contrast, choral repetition is a commonly used teaching technique.

Influenced by Confucianism, students feel rude if they interrupt, question, or argue with their teacher. Language activities like role-plays, problem-solving tasks, or information gap activities are strange to their culture of learning. When they fail to understand something, they are not daring enough to ask for clarification in public for fear of losing face. They are not pro-active enough to initiate interaction, either. In the classroom, they are expected to sit in silence unless the teacher calls them individually to speak. When a particular student is called upon to speak in class, her response tends to be very brief in the form of either a phrase or a short sentence. The teacher directs interaction by asking questions to elicit the reading text; she already knows the answers to her questions. If a student makes a mistake, the teacher intervenes immediately because she has to make sure that students do not make mistakes. Corrective feedback is part of the teacher’s role in the classroom. If the teacher does not give corrective feedback, the students will think that she is of poor competence.

**Constraints on teachers in using the communicative approach**

Vietnamese teachers of English, by and large, have positive attitudes towards the communicative approach, but they feel constrained to implement communicative teaching in their classroom for many reasons. Medgyes (1986) asserts that “the communicative classroom requires a teacher of extraordinary abilities: a multi-dimensional, high-tech, Wizard-of-Oz-like superperson — yet of flesh and blood” (p. 107). Communicative teaching is too challenging in Vietnam where the teacher’s English proficiency is low, classes are large, the buildings, furnishings and other facilities are basic, and only low levels of support can be provided in terms of materials, libraries and advisory services. New teaching methods require new understandings and skills. They often require teachers to spend more time doing additional preparatory work, while there are already many demands on teachers’ time in addition to their syllabus teaching work.

In secondary schools, teachers rarely have access to the input and resources of the target language. Not a single secondary school in Vietnam has ELT resources and materials available to teachers. The only teaching materials that are at their disposal are a textbook, a couple of practical grammar books, some test samples and a dictionary.
The opportunity for both teachers and students to "take part in meaningful interaction with highly competent speakers of the language" (Canale and Swain, 1980: 27) is extremely rare, if at all. In such a poor language input environment, teachers soon find their English fossilized. They themselves have problem in getting the meaning across in the target language, too.

The pre-determined syllabus and prescribed textbook are also frustrating to teachers if they are committed to communicative methods. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training designs the national curriculum and sets the syllabus in the school. The Ministry also monitors the implementation of the syllabus and sets the school final examinations. The syllabus and the textbook, once approved by the Ministry, become laws that must be strictly observed. With the misinterpretation of the principle of 'testing only what students have learnt', test writers confine the test content to what is covered in the textbook. This again encourages rote, memory-based learning.

The third major obstacle to the implementation of the communicative approach is the class size and the teaching schedule. All secondary schools have an average class size of between 45 and 52 students and they meet for only 3-5 hours a week for English. Inside the classroom, students sit in long rows with 5 students being in one row, thus becoming very immobile for communicative activities while the teacher is under pressure to cover the allocated syllabus in the time allowed.

Implications for education administrators and teacher-trainers

Over many centuries, western cultures have influenced Vietnamese culture to a great extent. The attitudes of Vietnamese people to these western cultures vary from time to time — now they resist, now they adopt them — but in either case, they know how to adapt those exotic cultures to suit their needs and their social contexts in the end. Historically, when Vietnamese scholars became aware of the deficiencies of the Confucianism-based education in the early 18th century, they decided to replace it with a western-style education. The new educational system enabled the Vietnamese to access new social ideologies and to develop their analytical thinking.

Although Vietnamese teachers take a positive view of the communicative approach to language teaching, they find it difficult to use this approach for their pedagogical practice. There are various reasons for this constraint in using communicative methods but the most important ones are the difficulty in creating "realistic second language situations" for their students who have no real-life communicative needs in the target language on the one hand, and the pressures to prepare their students for the discrete-point examinations, on the other. The claim that Vietnamese students are passive is misleading, because their passiveness in learning is the product of traditional teaching. If the teaching methods are changed more radically, students' learning styles will change accordingly.

To facilitate innovations in teaching methodologies, there must be some macro-changes, the most significant of which is to reform the testing system. Definitely, there is still a long way to go before Listening and Speaking tests can be administered nation-wide in Vietnam, for both economic and technical reasons. However, the traditional test can be changed to be more criterion-referenced to test grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills more communicatively. Communicative teaching should be supported by communicative testing. Unless students are tested in terms of skills to
use the language communicatively, rather than a good memory of language rules, testing cannot provide any positive backwash on teaching.

McGroarty (1984) asserts that "communicative competence, as a concept, can mean different things for different groups of students; program planners, administrators, and teachers will be able to provide better instruction only after considering the specific purposes for which the language is to be used (p. 257). This fact should also be highlighted during teacher training courses. Training should help to develop a teacher’s ability “to adopt a research orientation to their own classrooms and their own teaching” (Richards and Nunan, 1990: xii) in order to decide the appropriateness, feasibility, applicability and practicality of methods against their specific socio-cultural and pedagogical situations. It is crucial that teachers should be made to be aware that Canale and Swain’s (1980) model of communicative competence is not applicable to every context. The goal of competence should necessarily be modified to meet the students’ expectations and the socio-cultural context of teaching and learning. Flexibility in using the syllabus and flexibility in deciding how to approach the classroom culture on the part of the teachers are essential to the successful use of communicative approach.

Modernization of teaching methods does not mean westernization of pedagogical practices. The assumption that a language can be acquired not only for the purpose of communication but also through the process of communication is not challenge-free in all teaching situations. Pica (1997) argues that “communication is very critical to language learning but it is insufficient to meet the needs and goals of many learners” (p. 7). It is also unfair to think that foreign teaching techniques and materials are all irrelevant. Practice has proved that a culturally-adapted communicative approach can work well in Vietnamese classrooms.

Learning English in Vietnam, students rarely have opportunities for English communication outside the classroom. What they have learnt inside the classroom is for future use, rather than for immediate use. In this context, it is critical to maintain a good balance between instruction, correction, and communication. Researchers such as Lightbown and Spada (1993) support the view that exclusively form-based or meaning-based classes are less effective than meaning-based classes with some focus on form and corrective feedback. It is incumbent upon teacher trainers and teachers to have insights into Vietnamese pedagogical contexts to decide which aspects can be changed and which can be accepted. In teacher-training projects, there should be a partnership between teacher-trainers and teachers to address the challenge emerging from the constraints of the local culture and educational system with good understanding and adequate creativity. If we agree that learners are not ‘empty vessels”, we have to accept that teachers in training courses are not empty vessels, either. They have their own experience, beliefs, and values.

It is unquestionable that teachers’ practical knowledge is different from theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. Their resistance to change often results from their own learning experience and perceptions of teaching. For them, innovations should be judged on the basis of their usability and practicality. If innovations are relevant and applicable to teachers’ specific situations, they are likely to bring about changes in the classroom. Shaw (1992) argues that “human beings are generally half in one subculture and half out of another” (p. 12). Innovations in teaching methodology do not mean ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’. The traditional approach could be either improved in the direction of the principles of communicative language teaching, or used as a kick-off step in the communicative classroom. The teaching hierarchy could
be first accuracy, then fluency, or acquisition following learning, not the other way round.

From the above analysis of the Vietnamese classroom discourse, it is necessary to accept a hierarchy of negotiated interaction from choice elicitation, such as showing agreement or disagreement, to product elicitation, like giving factual information, then to process elicitation — for example, giving or asking for opinions. To do this, trainers in teacher training courses should provide trainees with hands-on experience in how to teach English communicatively in the local context through a balance of training, practicum, and evaluation.

Conclusions

On its progress to regional and global participation, Vietnamese traditional culture is facing challenges from in-coming exotic cultures. The current global trend is for national and international elements to both co-exist and be interdependent. This trend gives rise to the need to reconsider some traditional values that have become out-of-date and unsuitable to the new social contexts. Needless to say, Vietnam has decided to maintain its cultural integrity while integrating into the international community. To be successful in this target, Vietnamese people know that they should be wise enough to adapt what comes from outside but is thought to be suitable to their needs and their settings, and then create something of their own. There is ample historical evidence to support this.

Vietnam has decided to ‘take a short cut’ to the industrialization and modernization of the country because of its comparative advantages. In this strenuous endeavour for reform in the educational system in general, and in the area of language education in particular is a crucial factor. By reform, we do not mean throwing away all traditional values and practices. Practicality and applicability to specific teaching situation are factors of success in educational reform. A conical hat made of cheap and plentiful palm leaves fulfils its very necessary function in protecting people from tropical sun and rain. In a different climate, for example in a climate which is cold or dry, a hat will still be needed, but it won't be a conical hat. An appropriate technology should be one that fits local conditions, local needs and local purses.

Two essential factors support the use of communicative language teaching in Vietnam. First, the government sees proficiency in communicative English as essential for business and commercial contacts, as well as for access to information on technological development. Second, teachers have a favourable view of this approach. However, the socio-cultural context of the country creates some challenges. The communicative approach should, therefore, be “culturally attuned” to be effective in Vietnamese contexts (Ellis, 1996) in order to help English teaching in Vietnam to respond better to the vision of national development. Efforts to decide what is the right balance between traditional methods and modern methods according to learners’ needs and their learning environment and to facilitate learning and teaching should be encouraged among all stakeholders: administrators, syllabus designers, teacher-trainers, and teachers themselves.