

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT AND ITS EFFECT ON ASSESSMENT IN EFL CLASS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the Vietnamese context in relation to historical, cultural and social change in the country. These changes have exerted an influence on resistance of educational reform in general and in EFL assessment in particular. In this paper, major factors impacting on Vietnamese education are analyzed, including the Confucian Ideology, French colonialization, Soviet and US influences during the Vietnam War, and global influences as Vietnam has become a member of foreign organizations. It is argued that of all these factors, the dominant influence on ELT assessment is culture value and it may oppose teachers use modern assessment methods. It is hoped that the ideas presented will contribute to the understanding of Vietnam's education system and the factors impacting on education, EFL teaching and learning as well as assessment in higher education.

1 Introduction

Education is the field to which great priorities have always been given in Vietnam. However, progresses and achievements in this field remain far from satisfactory (WENR, 2017). One of the reasons for this sad reality is that emerging problems have been addressed with old solutions. Instruction and assessment are a good instance of this. There has been little attention to teaching methodology or to assessment to support students in pursuit of their achievements. In classrooms, the typical pedagogical methodology is teacher-centered and there has been a dearth of cooperative and collaborative learning, which “aims to create a highly specified sense of community in order to induce learning” (McCafferty, Jacobs, & Iddings, 2006, p.13). Plus, there has been a lack of meaningful feedback or comments for students' work although giving feedback is very important for instructional process as it is one of the ways to help teachers implement formative assessment in the classroom (William, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). According to Jang (2014), assessment is not an instrument for the educators to judge students' work technically but a tool to help both teachers and students to inform the process of learning and teaching, thereby improving instructions and guiding learning strategies for students. It is indeed “an activity whose primary purpose is pedagogical, that is, to help teachers plan instructions and guide student learning” (Jang, 2014, p. 5). However, assessment methods in Vietnam mainly focus on testing and high-stake examinations and they are often used to judge the progress of students at all levels of the educational system with all subjects. Therefore, for most of Vietnamese students, their learning goal is to pass examinations and for most instructors, their role is to provide knowledge to help students achieve required marks (Tran, 2015 cited in Dore, 1997a; Stobart, 2008). English as a foreign language (EFL) education is no exception.

It is not to be denied that sociocultural factors play a vital role in teaching and learning as

“learning is thought of as a social event taking place as a result of interaction between the learner and the environment” (Fahim & Haghani, 2012, p.693). With this view, clearly, the elements of society such as history, culture, economy, and so on exert an influence on teaching and learning, especially second language acquisition.

In this paper, I wish to present some features of the Vietnamese context in terms of its history, culture, and education to highlight its effects on higher education (HE), EFL teaching and learning in general and EFL assessment at tertiary level in particular.

2 Vietnamese Context

2.1 Vietnam: Brief History and Culture

Vietnam was established under its name ‘Van Lang’ more than 2,000 years ago. However, in the 2nd century BC, Vietnam was ruled by the Chinese and this domination lasted for more than 1,000 years. After many years, independence was gained in 1803, the King of Nguyen dynasty chose the name Vietnam for his kingdom and it was publicly accepted from that day. Vietnam withstood French colonization for almost a century from 1858 to 1954. After enjoying peace for several years, Vietnam was divided by the Vietnam war with the interference of the United States of America. At this time Vietnam was separated into two parts: North Vietnam and South Vietnam. While North Vietnam had the independence and became a communist state, South Vietnam came under the control of the US and embraced capitalism. In 1975, the country ended the North-South war with the withdrawal of the US troops from the South and became a unified country. Today’s Vietnam is a developing country with a fast-growing economy and has the membership of the United States Bilateral Trade Agreement, ASEAN Free Trade Area and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Le, 2011; Ngo, 2015; Nguyen, 2002).

Due to its long history of colonization by China, France and the United States, Vietnam has been inevitably affected by Chinese and Western culture. In the first place, Vietnamese indigenous culture is strongly impacted by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Huong & Fry, 2004; Nguyen, 2002). These ideologies are blended and are a vital part of Vietnamese peoples’ lives. In fact, most of Vietnamese consider themselves nominally Buddhists, but their manners and moral principles have adopted the hierarchy of Confucianism (Le, 2011). In Vietnamese society, filial piety is highly valued. Children are taught to obey and respect their parents, teachers and the elderly. To show their filial piety, children are required to gain success in the academy as the way to express their gratitude to their parents (Ngo, 2015). Also, children are taught to maintain their “face” as face-saving, a feature originating from Confucian standard, which is extremely important to their self-respect and their family’s honor (Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2015). Respect for knowledge and teachers is another cultural value affected by Confucian ideas. In this society, a teacher is highly respected and admired as they are well-educated and considered a “well of wisdom” (Le, 2011; Tran, 2015). This is shown in a Vietnamese proverb that values the role of the teacher: “Khong thay do may lam nen”- Without teachers, you can do nothing. Every year, there is a day to honor teachers on 20th of November, it is called Teachers’ Day. Secondly, Western culture has exerted an influence on Vietnamese culture as the results of French colonialism, American involvement and globalization. This is reflected in many kinds of arts, music, architecture, fashion, and more (Nguyen, 2002).

In general, these historical and cultural factors have an influence on every respect of Vietnamese

people's lives. The impact on Vietnamese education will be elaborated in the following parts.

2.2 Education in general and higher education in Vietnam

2.2.1 Education in general

Vietnamese education has some unique features due to its long history and culture. In the past, Confucianism has heavily affected Vietnamese people's lives and code of conduct, resulting in application of the knowledge transmission model in the educational system at all levels (Huong & Fry, 2004; Le, 2011; London, 2011; Ngo, 2015; Nguyen, 2002; Tran, 2015). Adopting the hierarchical principles of Confucian ideology, teachers were regarded a source of reliable knowledge to provide information to students. This form of instruction has been described as "the instructional (didactic) paradigm is exemplified typically by the passive transmission of information in the lecture format where lecturers talk and students listen, a mode that does not encourage student-teacher interaction and deep learning" (Harman & Bich, 2010, p.68). In the same vein, Nguyen (2002) noted:

Influenced by their traditional learning style, Vietnamese students usually keep quiet in class and wait until called upon to answer the questions asked by the teachers, instead of volunteering. This is often misunderstood as a passive or non-cooperative attitude...Since keeping quiet in class is to show respect to teachers as well as to create a productive learning environment, being talkative, interrupting, bragging, or challenging the teacher are not typical of Vietnamese culture. (pp. 3-4)

Indeed, the teacher-centeredness, as well as the examination-based system, lasted during the period Vietnam was under the control of the French colonialism and the US involvement (from 1858-1975). In this colonial period, Confucian ideology coexisted with the French-style educational system. However, the French particularly focused on designing and developing the curricula to serve French colonists' children in order to train them to become their functionaries in colonialism (Huong & Fry, 2004; Le, 2011). For this reason, during this period, 95% of Vietnamese people were illiterate (MOET, 1995). Also, tertiary education did not receive attention, leading to a weak foundation for high quality higher education institutions (Wilkinson & Valley, 2008).

From 1954-1975, during the separation of the North-South war, there were two different educational systems in Vietnamese education. In the South, students were trained with the American education model which focused on the practices and skills, while in the North, the educational model of the Soviet Union, which heavily emphasized theory, was adopted. This discrepancy between the models of education led to differences in teaching and learning. After national reunification, the Soviet model has been implemented uniformly nationwide and Vietnamese education system was restructured with five levels: pre-school, elementary (grade 1-5), lower secondary (grade 6-9), upper secondary (grade 10-12) and post-graduate. However, there was still a lack of development of quality higher education institutions due to "era of heavy handed socialist rule" (Wilkinson & Valley, 2008, p. 3). Education changed further after the Vietnam government issued the policy innovation "Doi moi" in 1986. Significantly, Vietnamese education gained achievements in 2005 when Vietnamese Government promulgated the Resolution 14 on the "Comprehensive Reform of Higher Education" by 2020, in which education and training reform, science and technology skills development and infrastructure and human resource development were the focus of attention (MOET, 2005).

2.2.2 Higher education (HE) in Vietnam

Vietnam is the only country in Southeast Asia whose higher education system dates back to 1076, with the first institution of higher education namely the ‘Temple of Literature’ (Harman et al., 2010; Huong & Fry, 2004). However, as mentioned earlier, due to historical reasons, the tertiary education in Vietnam has not been invested in and lagged far behind in comparison with other institutions in the same regions (Wilkinson & Valley, 2008). One criticism, according to World Education News and Research (WENR, 2017), is that Vietnamese post-secondary education has not produced highly qualified human resources to meet the demand of the country’s development of economy and society. Although the Vietnamese tertiary level has made positive changes from 1986 when Vietnam entered the period of innovation “*Doi moi*”, Vietnam has made a remarkable progress when becoming a member of foreign organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the United States Bilateral Trade Agreement, ASEAN Free Trade Area and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Harman et al., 2010; Huong & Fry, 2004). One gain is a “move away from narrow specialization to allow for broader and multiple academic fields and related professions” (Huong & Fry, 2004, p.209). Further, in response to the demands of internationalization, the Vietnamese government promulgated a Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) in 2005, in which education and training reform, especially renovation of higher education, has been placed as one of the foremost priorities in transforming the nation into a modern, industrialized country by the year 2020 (MOET, 2005). In HERA, responsibilities related to HE teaching and learning focused on major aspects, including (a) renovating and developing the curriculum that has a strong applied and professional orientation; (b) upgrading training methodologies by applying interactive teaching methods and ICTs to learning and teaching and introducing various learning styles, (c) developing instructors’ professional qualifications and improving the quality of master’s and doctoral degrees; and (d) promoting international integration of the tertiary system (MOET, 2005). Eventually, these reform objectives pave the way for the innovation of English language teaching and learning at the tertiary level, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 English language teaching and learning in higher education

In Vietnam, foreign languages like French, Russian, Chinese, and English were taught in the period of colonialism and the nation’s separation in the nineteenth century. However, English has become a key foreign language and has been widely taught at all levels of educational system since *Doi moi (Innovation)* (1986) and Vietnam is membership in foreign organizations (Duong & Chua, 2016; Harman et al., 2010; Le, 2011; Ngo, 2015; Van, 2013). In 2008, the Vietnamese Government promulgated the Decision on the approval of the project on teaching and learning foreign languages (DTLFL) in the period 2008-2020 with the emphasis on implementing a foreign language enhancement training program (MOET, 2008). The overall objective of this project is that:

by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently. This will enable them to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with variety of languages. This goal also makes language as an advantage for Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country (MOET, 2008, p.1).

This project provided opportunities for foreign institutions to cooperate with Vietnamese universities in exchange-programs or establish branch campuses in the country (Ngo, 2015; Thu Nguyen, Obaidul Hamid, & Moni, 2016). Australia's RMIT University, University of Suffolk, University of Virginia (The USA), West England (England), University of New South Wales (Australia), University of New Jersey, and so on are the evidence for this reality. Also, the increasing number of international instructors and scholars working in educational institutions is one effect of the policy.

In relation to EFL education, the new policy emphasizes the need to “construct and implement teaching program in a foreign language for some subjects at basic and major levels within college and university systems, and also select some key sectors at the senior college level to apply teaching program in a foreign language.” (MOET, 2008, p.3). Consequently, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focusing on learner-centeredness is being promoted in the EFL course of instruction in order to develop students' capacity to communicate in English (Nunan, 2013). English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is encouraged in academic institutions, to equip students with the ability to use English in the working environment. Blended learning, which combines both face-to-face and online environments, is also a new trend in English teaching and learning in the age of globalization (Hoang, 2015). This model aligns with the objective of higher education reform, where application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to learning and teaching should be fostered at the tertiary level.

However, after nine years, the national foreign language project (NFLP) has failed to meet the goal in terms of the quality of teaching and learning at all academic levels (Vietnamnet.vn, 2018). The English proficiency level of Vietnamese students has not remarkably increased despite the effort and initiatives of the government. According to the English Proficiency Index released by Education First (2017), Vietnam ranked 34th out of 80 non-native English speaking countries with an average of 53.43 on a scale of 100 score, standing behind Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, India, Hong Kong and South Korea in Asia. Although this level of English proficiency has an improvement in the last five years, from “low level” English skills in 2012-2014 to a “moderate level” in 2017, some Vietnamese education experts stated that the results might not accurately reflect the real situation as it is based on a large-scale testing solution, EF Standard English Tests (EFSET) and they might not show exactly Vietnamese adults' communicative competence as they are more prone to learn for testing not for communication (News.zing.vn, 2017). Another study showed that of 2,000 Vietnamese IT students tested with a standardized assessment, only 90 students (5%) were sufficiently proficient in English to be hired as IT engineers in Intel company (Wilkinson & Vallely, 2008). The reason given was that the traditional grammar-translation teaching method and memorization strategy had the negative effects (Le, 2011, Duong & Nguyen, 2006; Thi et al., 2014). Assessment and curriculum were also blamed for this situation (News.zing.vn, 2017), as discussed in the next section.

2.4 The assessment of English language learning in Vietnamese higher education

2.4.1 The concept of language assessment

Jang (2014) stated that language assessment is “a purposeful activity that gathers information about students' language development. It is a means to a wide range of educational ends and is fundamental to all educational pursuits” (p.5). For him, assessment is a tool for teachers and

students to inform the process of pedagogy and learning, thereby improving their instructions and guiding learning strategies for students. In the same vein, Purpurla (2016) indicated that “assessment in its simplest form is a principled collection of information elicited under certain conditions for some intended purpose, leading to performance that can be scored or characterized verbally, analyzed, and interpreted to produce assessment records” (p.192).

Clearly, depending on the purpose of use, educators select summative or formative assessment for their classroom context. Formative assessment or assessment for learning is used to “provide feedback at various stages of the learning process while summative assessment is used to evaluate what the learner has achieved at a particular instructional time” (Jang, 2014, p.12). However, this author stated that there is a no clear-cut distinction between the two terms because they mutually support the teaching and learning process. He noted that the results of the summative assessment of a semester would be used to adjust and determine the curriculum of the next term, helping learners reach their future goal (Jang, 2014). Therefore, in the classroom, teachers need to understand the functions of assessment and employ many kinds of assessment activities so that they can help to improve their instructions as well as student learning.

2.4.2 Assessment and language assessment in Higher Education in Vietnam

As assessment is an integral part of the educational process, it is believed that no educational innovation can bring about desired outcomes without corresponding innovations in assessment. In the past, little attention was paid to assessment in Vietnam in general and language assessment in Vietnamese HE institutions due to historical, social and economic factors (Tran, 2015).

Before 1858, due to the influence of Confucian Culture, assessment in Vietnam was mainly based on Mandarin examinations, which were organized at two levels, regional and national, to select the best students to enter the civil service. In this kind of examination, students were required to interpret and compose Chinese philosophical writing, literature, history and sciences. The language used basically was Chinese and language assessment adopted from Chinese imperial examinations (London, 2011). Mandarin examinations ended when Vietnam experienced French colonization. In order to serve colonial administrations, French was used in schools. As a result, language assessment at that time was adapted from the French examination system. However, this kind of assessment existed shortly, then an educational reform set up the French-Vietnamese political program, with the aim of unifying local and colonial education, was carried out (vnexpress.net, 2017).

After the national reunification in 1975, assessment focused on examinations as a condition for the entry into secondary and tertiary education (Tran, 2015 cited in MOET, 1975a, 1975b, 1986). After 1986, the field of assessment became the focus of attention as it was considered “one of the measures to improve educational quality essential for national industrialization, modernization and international integration” (Tran, 2015, p.49). Like pedagogy, assessment in general, and language assessment in particular are required to innovate to meet the competitive market and globalization.

From HERA (2005) and NFLP for the 2008-2020 periods, language assessment has received much attention (MOET, 2008). More specifically, higher education has been tasked to “renovate methods of assessment and grading in language training; construct an electronic data bank that

helps assess and grade students better; be active in applying IT in language training; improve ability in testing and assessing language training quality” (MOET, 2008, p. 3).

Primarily, updated curricula and a new form of assessment and evaluation have been introduced and implemented in many HE institutions. For instance, instead of following the “school-year training”, a “credit-training system” has been carried out, giving students flexibility and independence in their learning. In addition, “teachers and educators are being encouraged to understand the mutual relationship between teaching and learning activities in the educational process/cycle” (Harman et al., 2010, p.81) and the assessment moved from 10-point grading system to letter “A, B, C”. Also, besides several tests applied to assess the student’s progress during a course, a wide range of student attributes has been concerned, such as students’ participation and the contributions to group discussions. In relation to ELT education, recently, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been adopted and used as a reference for designing curriculums, lesson plans, and assessment. It provides the indicators to define requirements for competency and capacity in listening, speaking, reading and writing on six levels. National foreign language system requires non-English major students in university and college obtain B1 level, the third of six levels under CEFR (A1-beginners; A2-elementary; B1, B2-intermediate; C1, C2- advanced) (MOET, 2008). However, critics argue that this kind of framework is not appropriate for the tertiary level as “teaching and learning of English need to be designed in a way to fit the Vietnamese capability, conditions and the demand for English in different working environments” (Vietnamnet, 2014). Despite such arguments, this framework has been employed in many higher institutions as the map view for English instruction and assessment as well.

Although the Government’s Decisions pave the way for encouraging instructors to adopt formative assessment methods in the higher education system with various approaches to assess students’ progress, the Confucian tradition has continued to exert a powerful influence on instructor’s perceptions. In classrooms, teachers are authoritative to ‘pour’ knowledge to students and norm-referenced assessment approaches have been adopted (Luong, 2016). This reinforces a barrier between students and teachers, and their relationship is still hierarchical. This, hence, limits students’ skills needed to develop during their academic career such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication, which are necessary for a current dynamic labor-market. In a meeting recently, Mr. Tran Anh Tuan, Deputy Head of Department of Higher Education under Ministry of Education and Training, has admitted that there would be a tough challenge when fulfilling the targets of the project by 2020 (Vietnamnet, 2018). In fact, obtaining a B1 level upon graduation is not feasible for most undergraduate students when “learning English still attaches special importance to reading and writing skills so as to cope with examinations, rather than in practical applications” (Nguyen, 2017, p.6).

In general, despite the above-mentioned changes, the quality of post-secondary education generally and EFL education particularly have been slowly responded and summative assessment has still dominated the Vietnamese educational climate and driven the instruction at all academic levels. According to Brown (2003), “for optimal learning to take place, students in the classroom must have the freedom to experiment, to try out their own hypotheses about language without feeling that their overall competence is being judged in terms of those trials and errors” (p.4). Hence, there should be a need to apply an alternative assessment that “welcomes students to join in assessing the processes and products of learning, as well as the affective side of learning, such as students’ motivations, attitudes, and self-esteem as learners” (Jacobs & Renandya, 2016, p.20). Nevertheless, many educators notice that seeking an effective

way to contextualize it and to combine alternative assessment and summative assessment to match Vietnamese learning and teaching culture is still a big question as “the challenges of developing new approaches, within a system dominated by high-stakes external tests and formal examinations, based on entirely different models, are much greater” (James, 2017, p.7).

3 Conclusion

Vietnam’s National Foreign Language 2020 Project has been implemented for nine years. However, the achievement of this project remains unsatisfactory (Nguyen, 2017; Vietnamnet.vn, 2018). The problems Vietnamese education in general and EFL education in particular faces today are in part a consequence of the country’s history, culture and globalization. Especially, the Confucian Culture heavily affects teachers and students and may impede them approach to modern teaching methodology and learning strategies. It is hoped that the ideas presented will contribute to the understanding of Vietnam’s education system and the factors that impact on the education, EFL teaching and learning as well as assessment in post-secondary settings.

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