

***TESOL Teachers' Reflections on Their Language Learning Experiences:
A Case Study of Three Primary English Language Teachers in Vietnam***

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Abstract

Given that language learning experience in the past has great impact on TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers' beliefs and practice today, this research study explores Vietnamese TESOL teachers' learning experience of English or other foreign languages during their school time and its impact on their construction of teacher identity. Data were collected from reflective journals and narrative interviews conducted with three primary English language teachers in Vietnam. Their learning history, from early 1980s to late 1990s, is embedded in the historical background and sociocultural context of Vietnam. The findings provide insight into foreign language teaching and learning practice, with which the participants engaged. In particular, traditional grammar-translation approaches dominated the discourse of foreign language education throughout the country. As a consequence, a generation of students at that time was demotivated to learn English and other foreign languages. Beyond the issues of teaching and learning, the research findings highlight varied aspects of the sociocultural context of post-war Vietnam encompassing language policy, education, socio-politics of language teaching, and social life. Rather than reflecting on their language learning experience as the course of past events, the participants regard it as a lesson for their TESOL practice today. They emphasise that TESOL education in the current context should not be developed on the teaching and learning practice in the past, but on a combination of local reality and the global trends. The study discusses implications for policies of foreign language education and TESOL in Vietnam.

Keywords: English language, learning experience, TESOL

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Introduction

Language learning experience during school years can have a great impact on language teachers' teaching beliefs and practices today. In their teaching work, teachers often look back on how their language classes had taken place when they were at school. As a result, they can then make appropriate decisions for developing their current pedagogical practices. Given that a language learning history is seen as an integral part of a language teacher's trajectory of professional development, this research study explores Vietnamese TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers' reflections on their learning experiences of English during their school days and the impact they have had on their identity construction as English language teachers. The participants are three primary English language teachers (three cases), who were engaged in English language learning during the 1980s and 1990s. Their reflections on foreign language education from that time could give them some valuable lessons in terms of constructing their own TESOL practice today. Beyond the issues of teaching and learning, the research findings highlight various aspects of the sociocultural context of post-war Vietnam encompassing language policy, education, the socio-politics of language teaching, and social life.

A Historical Overview of Language Teaching in Vietnam

The Chinese written language played an important part, not only in the world of scholarship, but also in the sociocultural life of Vietnam. Within a period of ten centuries (from the 1000s to the early 1900s), it was the language of scholarship and administration, so learning Chinese script was a must for those who wanted to get access to the academic world and to gain social status. The seventeenth century marked a new chapter for language development in Vietnam as Catholic missionaries from Europe arrived in Vietnam to spread their religion. For the purpose of preaching to local people, they invented a new written form for the Vietnamese language on the basis of the Roman alphabetical system, from which the written form or script of the Vietnamese language used today, originated. In 1858, the French began the invasion of Vietnam and colonized the country until 1945. French was therefore used in educational settings as the medium of instruction, whereas the Vietnamese language was used in everyday life. The Chinese language was restricted to the triennial civil service examinations, which were officially brought to an end in 1916.

Vietnam became independent from the French in 1945, so the Vietnamese language with a Romanized script immediately became official throughout the country. Since the majority of the population was illiterate, first language (L1) education was given priority. Foreign language teaching, especially French, was neglected because of prejudice against anything that was left behind by the colonists. No sooner had the Vietnamese people begun to live in peace than they had to suffer the split of the country into two halves, each with a different government. Determined by political conditions, the L2 language teaching context indicated differences in policy and planning. The North, manipulated by Socialist countries, chose Russian and Mandarin Chinese for their foreign language curriculum, which was implemented mainly in high schools. In contrast, students in the South could study either English or French as their first foreign language for their seven years of secondary education. At the senior high school level, they studied the other tongue as the second foreign language

(Nguyen, 1997). As soon as the whole country was united in 1975, education in general, and foreign language teaching in particular, became a political consideration.

The close relationship with Socialist countries supported the teaching of Russian from the secondary to tertiary levels. Mandarin Chinese, however, was eliminated in the national curriculum for all levels because of the border dispute between the two countries in the late 1970s. Stereotyped as the “languages of Capitalism”, English and French were taught in some schools, especially in the South. The political upheaval had serious effects on the foreign language education in Vietnam once the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries collapsed. Russian was replaced by English as the first choice for a foreign language in all institutions because of the imperative to integrate into the global community. Since the Vietnamese government adopted the “open door” policy in 1986 in order to cooperate with all the world, other foreign languages have also been taught, such as Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish, and Korean.

Language teachers’ learning experiences

In education in general, teachers’ former schooling experience is seen as a source of personal practical knowledge, which teachers find important in their teaching work and their lives as well (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). By the same token, learning experiences in the field of language teaching are also an integral part of their ongoing process of learning to teach (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Tsui, 2011). Through the lens of language teacher identity, Miller (2009) highlights the role of teachers’ learning backgrounds together with other sociocultural factors as a resource for identity construction. From the perspective of teacher cognition, many teachers state that their beliefs about teaching today are often based on their learning experiences in the past (Bailey et al., 1996; Borg, 2006). With a research focus on second language teacher education, especially the initial stage when teachers enter their teaching careers, Farrell (2009) observed that novice language teachers often capitalise on their previous schooling experiences, which include “all levels of education, from kindergarten, elementary, and high school, to university” (p. 183). As teachers are so involved in their history, they not only recollect their old schooling experiences but also engage with the practice of reflective teaching (Burton, 2009; Richards & Farrell, 2011). Furthermore, stories teachers tell about their schooling are seen as narratives, which help teachers retell their lives in a sense that they “interpret their lives as told in different ways, to imagine different possibilities, and to actively write their lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478).

Given the impact of their learning experience on teacher’s development, most empirical studies on teacher identity often take into account this important period. For example, in a research study on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers’ construction of identity, Duff and Uchida (1997) found that four participating teachers drew on their learning experiences in the past including classroom activities, examinations, textbooks and teachers’ teaching methods. In a similar vein, Hayes (2005) explored the process of becoming English language educators for three Sri Lankan participants and found that the participants’ motives for entering their teaching career were partly based on model English teachers at secondary schools. In Tsui’s study (2007), a lecturer of TESOL looked back on his learning history and related the past experiences to his teaching work at university. Other than that he

claimed that his identity as an EFL teacher was built on his learner identity. In relation to his students, he believed that his learner identity would help him to understand them and their learning problems. Overall, language learning experience is part of teachers' trajectories in learning how to teach. Grounded on both a theoretical background and previous studies on this topic, this research study could provide a useful insight into TESOL teachers' learning experiences in the Vietnamese context.

The study

Methodology

This research study is grounded on a qualitative approach because it provides an in-depth description, understanding and interpretation of the human experience (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Under the umbrella of the qualitative approach, a case study is specifically employed to explore the language learning experiences of three participants, known as the three cases. In education and other social sciences, a case study is advocated due to its advantages, including being central to allowing investigators to understand the phenomenon being studied in a holistic and meaningful way as the cases are placed in real-life contexts (Yin, 2009). In the same vein, Duff (2008) pointed out that case study research was being employed in an increasing number of studies in applied linguistics, especially research on the emergent themes of language teaching practice and teacher identity.

Participants

Three primary English language teachers participated in this research study as the three cases. Given the characteristics and requirements of teaching English to young learners, they were all female. Hoa, aged 39 years, is the oldest in the group and she is teaching in a state primary school in Danang, a city in the middle of Vietnam. She started learning English as a compulsory subject in the secondary curriculum in 1984 and continued with this language study until she finished high school in 1991. After graduating from university in 1995, she entered a career of primary English language teaching, so she has had 18 years of teaching experience. Lan is 35 years old with 12 years of teaching experience. On her journey in foreign language learning, she commenced with Russian in the first grade of secondary education. Due to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, she had to invest her time in English learning in an evening centre while she was still learning Russian in school. After that she went to a prestigious high school for gifted students in foreign languages. She passed a highly competitive examination to be admitted into the English class in that school. At university, she did a Bachelor's degree in TESOL. She has worked in a prestigious private primary school in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam since university graduation. The last participant, Nguyen, undertook English language learning from 1991 to 1998 in a small school on the outskirts of Danang. Like Hoa and Lan, she chose a degree in TESOL at university. She has been an English teacher in a primary school in a poor village since 2002.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this research study were collected from narrative interviews conducted with the three participating teachers. In qualitative research, an interview is seen as "the

central method of data generation studies [focusing] on participant life histories and narratives” (Talmy, 2010, p. 134). Likewise, Creswell (2013) suggests that personal conversations or interviews could be the best ways to have participants tell their story and lived experiences. Prior to conducting interviews with each case, an interview guide was developed. During the interview, each teacher narrated her English language learning experiences. After some icebreaker questions, each case was asked about when they had first learned English and how the English classes took place then. As the interviewees caught the flow of the interview, they felt more inspired and open to sharing all of their memories and experiences regarding English learning from the beginning of secondary school to university.

The data analysis was based on the procedure of data deduction and confirmation of findings. The text transcribed from each interview was carefully read and coded on the basis of inductive analysis procedures. As each participating teacher had her own history of language learning, the strategy of a single case analysis was used to highlight the unique features of each teacher’s lived history. In the last section, the three teachers addressed the same issue, that is, the lessons they had learnt from their learning experiences for their teaching practices today. As such, the strategy of a cross-case analysis was used.

Findings

Hoa: “English is a reminder of those days of hardship, happiness, and achievements”

Hoa’s English learning trajectory was linked with socio-political upheavals, the consequences of which were visible both within her own family and in the mainstream society. After reunification, her parents were not employed by the new government, as they had worked for the rival side during the war. In the interview, she shuddered slightly at the memory:

My dad’s health was too bad; otherwise, he would have been... uhm...imprisoned... you know... like most soldiers who used to work for the South government. My mum had to sell all the belongings to open up a small stationery shop. My family, including five people, survived on that shop for nearly 20 years.

Despite adult concerns about socio-political issues, Hoa enjoyed her school life; and above all, she was excited to explore the beauty of the English language. Looking back on those days, Hoa said: “English is a reminder of my childhood mixed by hardship, happiness, and achievements”. From the very beginning, Hoa found a sense of belonging to this beautiful language, but it was viewed by most students as just another school subject:

I usually sat under the plum tree in front of my house practising English. I closed my eyes and mumbled the words. My mother passed by and she asked me “what’s wrong?”, and then she even told the neighbours “something’s wrong with my girl every time she comes home from school”. My brother explained, “She’s learning English”

Hoa's English learning history was also marked by sad stories. Among the students in her class, Hoa was closest to Mai and treated her as a "close confidant". By coincidence, Mai's father had also worked for the former South government; yet he was more miserable than Hoa's father due to a two-year imprisonment after reunification. The English language helped to connect the two girls with a similar family background. Hoa has always remembered the question Mai's father asked: "What do you learn English for?" The two girls failed to answer and then he said: "For freedom". As a thirteen-year-old girl, Hoa was not able to understand what he meant by such a short answer; but later, she knew that most families categorised as having a "bad profile" (for their employment or involvement in the South government), invested in their children's English learning. This was in preparation for emigration to English speaking countries in search of a better life and freedom. Sadly, Hoa often heard stories elsewhere about boats carrying emigrants sinking off the coast. In such a circumstance, the naïve girl could not help doubting her father's belief: "Is it for English and freedom that thousands of people have risked their lives on the ocean?"

Lan: "Mum became my English learning companion"

Russian marked the point of departure for Lan's foreign language learning journey because it was the only foreign language taught in her secondary school. Therefore, she took English lessons from an evening centre rather than from formal instruction at school. Teaching and learning practices in evening classes were, in Lan's recollection, dependent on the textbook named "Streamline". Teachers had no communicative activities other than to strictly follow the prescribed structure of the textbook. Lan recalled the activities in a typical evening English class in the early 1990s: choral reading, a role play for reading a dialogue, translating the dialogue from English to Vietnamese, finding Vietnamese meanings for new words, and listening to cassette tapes.

A significant event took place in the second semester of the English course when her mother was required by the local department of education to attend a TESOL course in the overall scheme of re-training Russian teachers to teach English. In despair, she had no other choice than to comply, because Russian was no longer taught in almost every school. Given such an unexpected event, Lan said that her mother became her "English learning companion". Lan easily surpassed her mother; yet she learned from her mother qualities necessary for a teacher such as patience, commitment, and a sensitivity to students' needs. In addition, the teaching knowledge and experience gained from her mother contributed to Lan's construction of her teaching expertise and professional identity:

At first, mum was kind of stressed. She often asked me to help her, because I had already learned for five months. Then she felt confident. She had background in Russian, so grammar was not a problem with her. I could ask her for help when I didn't understand any grammatical point. Mum had a lot of interesting materials to share with me. So my English improved a lot. What I learned from mum was her teaching manner; I mean the way she talked, explained, and instructed me. I think my teaching now has something of hers.

The English language knowledge, both acquired from the evening course and reinforced by her mother's learning sources, helped Lan secure a place at one of the country's most prestigious seats of learning for foreign languages. In the new school, Lan met the entry requirement for the English class, where all students were endowed with natural talent for English. Instead of being proud of her identity as a student in a prestigious school, she immediately became disappointed with its competitive environment, where every student made a determined effort to score full marks in the examinations. In such a culture of teaching and learning, there was hardly any room for communicative practice involving the English language. In those circumstances, Lan had a sense of herself as being isolated from the mainstream community regarding a perspective on English language purposes:

We had English classes every day. All of my classmates were diligent. Can you imagine we had six periods of English on the official timetable? But to prepare for competition, we were required to attend three extra classes. All we did was to complete the sample tests. I still remember we had to learn by heart hundreds of phrasal verbs, sentence transformation, clozes, and reading comprehension. It's funny that when I showed those to an Australian friend, he told me he couldn't complete all of them. I wonder why we had to study the kind of English that native speakers had never used.

Nguyen: "I was super happy to speak English to foreigners"

Nguyen lived in an impoverished suburb populated by the blue-collar working class, including workers, peasants, street vendors, and the unemployed. In most families, the basic needs for family survival were considered to be more important than children's access to English instruction. In terms of societal attitudes towards English, Nguyen still clearly recalls the incident when she told her neighbours about her delight in learning this language. Contrary to her excitement, they were indifferent to her emotions:

An old man living next door said to me: "We don't need English. Can you exchange it for food and money? We need those things for survival, not English..." I think that everyone had a hard life then. I mean that their basic needs were not met, so they couldn't think about the kids' education or how they learned English....or what they learned for.

The most beautiful memory about her English learning history was trying the English language acquired in a formal setting for communication in a real life context. Living close to an orphanage run by Catholic nuns, Nguyen often went there for volunteer work. One day, a group of foreign tourists happened to visit the orphanage. As none of the nuns could speak English, Nguyen offered to tell them about the orphanage in spite of her limited repertoire of English:

I was a little confused at first, but then tried to remember what I had learned in class. It's awesome that they could understand me. They introduced themselves to me and I could catch some basic information. I knew they're from the U.S. They came to visit my city and by the way dropped in to this orphanage. That moment was like ...I discovered something very important.

They were very glad to know that I was learning English.... and encouraged me to study better. I helped the nuns to welcome some more groups later on.

“I will feel guilty if my students become dumb and deaf like our generation”: What can participants learn from their learning history for teaching practice today?

In their narratives, each participant teacher highlighted important points of their English learning history. Despite their varied perspectives, these teachers, by common consent, regarded the experience of English learning as being a contribution to their current teaching practice today. Simply put, the English learning background from schooling was a good lesson that each teacher learns from for transforming their teaching practice today: “I see the English learning experience as a mirror to look into my teaching now”.

The foremost lesson they learned from their own learning experiences was that the prevalent approaches of grammar-translation in those days were no longer appropriate for language education these days. As a result, they prepared themselves for change; otherwise, they would be returning to the old paths of traditional teaching from which their generation had suffered: “I will feel guilty if students become dumb and deaf like our generation,” (Nguyen). To Lan, learners today, who are different from her generation, are a force for change: “Students today are active. We can’t teach them in the same ways our teachers taught us 20 years ago”.

Lan, in a voice of resistance, contended that there would be no room for grammar-translation methods in TESOL practice today. Rather than “writing a list of English words in one column and Vietnamese equivalents in the other column” and “forcing students to do grammar exercises all the time”, teachers today are required to engage students with communicative and creative activities. Furthermore, based on her own experience in English classes where there was a distance between teachers and students, Lan understands that teachers need to be more friendly and closer to students. By doing these things, teachers not only free themselves from traditional teaching practices, but also develop their own positive self-images:

In those days, I feel that teachers taught us in a traditional and passive way. So I always have this thought in my mind: I have to find some way to attract the students, or else they may feel my class is boring. I try to be friendly to my students. You know, when your students see you as a friend, they would be more confident in class. Since I realized that what they taught me at school was just something so simple and traditional, I think I have to do it differently. That’s my identity. You know, we teachers often discuss teaching methods, and some guys admit that they found their classes boring. And they explain: “I’m going the same way as my teachers before”. This is sad, ‘cos those teachers just copy what made them suffer in those days.

From quite a radical viewpoint, Nguyen and Hoa thought that the grammar-driven ELT practices of those days prevented them from developing communicative skills. In particular, Hoa recollected: “Students then hardly opened their mouth in an English class unless the teacher asked them to stand up to read out the answer”. Only after the committed teachers, namely the model teachers whom they each admired, took over the class were they instructed to speak English. Nevertheless, not all students were

lucky enough to be given inspiring English lessons by such enthusiastic teachers. In a determined effort to enable their students to speak English, and not to become “deaf and dumb” like their generation, the participant teachers all perceived the necessity of a communication-oriented ELT practice.

On one or two occasions during her schooling, Nguyen used English for communicating with foreigners in a real life context; hence she knew how crucial it was to offer students similar situations. However, the ELT context in Vietnam, where English is learned in the classroom rather than spoken in daily life, impedes this ambition. To provide learners with stimulating resources, the teachers have no other choice than to maximise learning opportunities within classrooms:

You know the occasions I talked to the native speakers in English....They had a great impact on my English learning. Now I really want my children to have a chance like that. I'm sure that they will love English and their English will improve a lot. But it's not easy to find foreigners in the surrounding areas. Another difficulty is that we never use English in the community. Then I have to think of teaching and learning activities...and make them relevant to a real life context. (Nguyen)

The participants agreed on the paramount importance of learners' positive attitudes, which must be mostly cultivated by teachers. They think this idea is essential because most English teachers in their school days neither inspired nor encouraged students to study, but threatened or demotivated them. “We students just sat in silence and listened to teachers in those days. If I teach young learners in that way, they don't bother to study,” said Hoa. Similarly, Nguyen explained how she differentiated her teaching today from her learning practices years ago:

In those days, the teacher taught us new words in class. At home, we had to write them many times to remember, say ten words again and again on four pieces of paper during one night. The day after in class, she checked them, but we almost always forgot. We remembered ten words at home, but five disappeared from our minds in class. Now I teach vocabulary in such a different way that children can remember new words right in class.

Nguyen has always remembered the critical incidents regarding the teacher-student relationships, which she witnessed in English classes in the past. The lesson she has learnt for her teaching practice today is that teachers should be sensitive and gentle to learners. It is also advisable that they not show their authoritarian side in class. Under no circumstance do they threaten students:

Now I want to check students' knowledge of the previous lesson, I just ask them some questions as if I'm talking to them. For example, they studied the structure ‘How old are you?’ yesterday, and today I want to check it. Before I start the lesson, I just go around the class and ask some students, ‘How old are you?’ If I follow the way of the teachers in those days, I will ask some children to go to my desk and say “Tell me the meaning of ‘*How old are you?*’ in Vietnamese”. Then they will be terribly scared.

The stories each participant teacher told addressed various issues emerging in their trajectory in English learning. Their perspectives on those issues and the whole history of language learning demonstrated both similarities and differences, reflecting the sociocultural background of each individual. Nevertheless, they had reached a shared belief that their current teaching work had benefited from what they had experienced in their English learning history. At a more conceptual level, they all perceived the experience of those days as a resource and also as a reflective tool for individual agency and identity construction: “I always reflect on what and how I was taught in those days, and then relate this to my current teaching context today” (Hoa).

Discussion

The participants’ history of English language learning provides in-depth understanding not only of the discourse of English language education in the past, but also of teachers’ ongoing process of development. From the sociocultural perspective, the normative ways of thinking and acting as embedded in classrooms where teachers were once students, have great impact on their teaching work today (Johnson, 2009). Similarly, Borg (2006) suggested that teachers’ beliefs and practice partly result from their learning experiences in the classroom. Looking at their learning narratives, we can easily recognise that the participant teachers all had characteristics that could be ascribed to being a good learner of English, including knowledge of the English language, learning strategies, and motivations (Rubin, 2005; Ushioda, 2008). Their learning success, when judged in the sociocultural context of Vietnam during the historical period from 1981 to 1998, highlights their individual efforts to engage with English. They represent a small number of learners, who overcame constraints to be successful, while the majority of students were “dumb and deaf” in terms of English. Traditional approaches of teaching and learning were the most apparent aspect of their resistance to the discourse of language education in their time. More specifically, they rejected the dominant approaches of grammar-translation in most English classes at that time. In a transition from learners to teachers, they have promoted the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT), as a replacement for traditional approaches, for both TESOL and foreign language education in Vietnam. As teachers, they understand that students today are fundamentally different from students in their time of schooling; therefore, it is impossible to impose the educational norms and teaching approaches of a quarter of a century ago on the educational landscape today. In comparison to the literature, their perspectives on innovative education are contradictory to what has been discussed by leading researchers regarding the dichotomy between CLT and traditional methods. In other words, the three teachers among the multitude of English teachers elsewhere in Vietnam, have supported CLT and progressive pedagogies; whereas, in TESOL literature in particular, these approaches have been considered inappropriate or even counterproductive in the cultural and educational discourses in Asian contexts (Canagarajah, 2012; Le, 2004; McKay, 2010; Phan, 2008).

Beyond teaching and learning practices within classrooms, the participant teachers’ experiences in learning English depict Vietnamese society during the two-decade period, namely the 1980s and 1990s. It provides insight into the discourse of language teaching, the socio-politics of education, and the sociocultural mosaic of Vietnam. A sociological approach to their learning history will, accordingly, help researchers explore a variety of social and historical aspects at the core of teaching and learning

languages. In terms of the politics of TESOL, researchers have argued that Western ideologies are imposed on TESOL theory and practice as manifested in the import of CLT, liberal pedagogies, and cultural norms from the West, mainly from English-speaking countries, to non-Western contexts (Holliday, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; McKay, 2010). If this theoretical framework is used to explore the socio-politics of language education in Vietnam, social and cultural meanings hidden below the surface of language education are unlikely to be decoded. Through the participants' English learning history, we can see that the TESOL practice in Vietnam is not as "pure" and "naïve", as researchers have overgeneralized for all non-Western contexts. Given the historical background in Vietnam in the second half of the twentieth century, notably the division between the North and the South leading to the Vietnam War, politics penetrated the sociocultural life in Vietnam, especially in education as shown by the learning histories of the participants. Beyond the educational setting, people in the community, whether from a low education level or intellectual background, imposed their political views and stereotypes on English or other foreign languages. In this sense, the discourse of language education was affected by two political streams, one within the educational context and the other in mainstream society (Pennycook, 2000). Unfortunately, the sociopolitical complexity of language education in Vietnam has not attracted much attention.

Conclusion

This study provides insight not only into English language education but also into the sociocultural life of Vietnam in the past. Three participating teachers see their experiences in learning English during their schooling as a source for their ongoing process of teacher development. It is, therefore, advisable that language teachers reflect on their learning history and relate their past experience to their trajectory of learning to teach. The most important lesson that the three teachers learned for their practice today was the progressive approaches to language teaching, and especially that CLT should be implemented. Otherwise, students today could experience a repeat of their teachers' language education failures from the past. Through their narratives, they hoped that education leaders would have appropriate policies in language education for the contemporary context in Vietnam.

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