

## **ENHANCING SKILLS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING EFL AT TERTIARY LEVEL USING CULTURE-BASED APPROACH AND COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Today, Englishes is concerned with the expansion of English around the world and with its development into distinctive first, second and foreign language varieties, these having been subject to different classifications and models of analysis. In most universities in Vietnam English is the compulsory subject and the requirement set for English level among graduate students is getting more demanding. The reason is policy makers and curriculum designers are oriented by international exams to modify their English programs. Hence, students are required to produce free writing as well as achieve an adequate reading ability and some other skills. Nonetheless, many of them cannot cope with the program as they encounter difficulties both objective and subjective. This paper examines possible subjective and objective hindrances among Vietnamese students as well as Asian students, the goals they should hit in today era and solutions to tackle with the problem. Here it proposes the use of culture-based approach and cognitive perspective to pinpoint Asian thinking and its influence on English performance and to find an answer to improving students' skills with detailed analysis on activities to be implemented in English classes. More importantly, the paper also gives implications for curriculum designers in order to make teachers, learners and topic learning into consideration as it is a significant factor in determining quantity, quality, and nature of classroom interaction. The aim of this paper is to raise stakeholders' awareness of TESOL professionals about the cultural issues related to language education and to provoke further research, thought, and discussion about ways in which theories and practices can be applied in ESL/EFL teaching situations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Asian Students, Writing, Reading Skills, Culture-Based Approach, Cognitive Perspective

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### **INTRODUCTION**

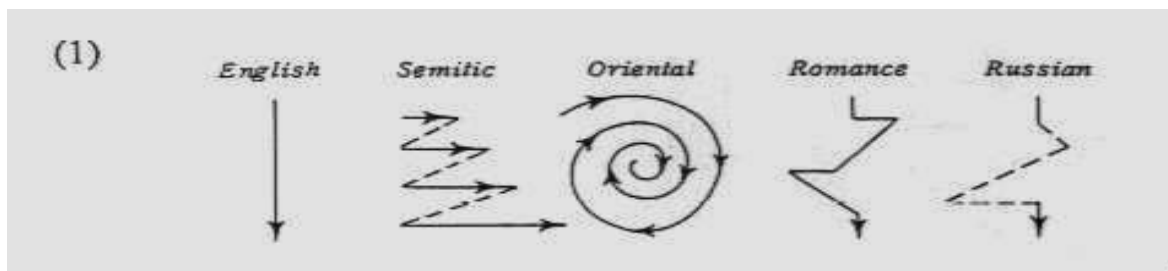
Teaching and learning English has never been out of concerns as long as the globalization increasingly breakouts. It is, in fact, one of indispensable factors of a country's progress, especially ASEAN countries in the age of integration and development. What is more, the demands for English proficiency have been also boosted considerably in terms of communicative and academic English. In Vietnam, a national project has been launched since 2008 with purpose that over 30% of employees have the language ability at least level 3 in 2020. Many Vietnam universities hence have proposed several English as Foreign Language (EFL) curricula in order to meet the ministry of education's policy. So far, for graduated students have reached the B1 level, yet they still struggle in communicating in English with foreign partners due to the cultural gaps. For undergraduate students, learning English still has some drawbacks for the curricula's inadequacy in facilitating students' background with regards to cultural and cognitive perspectives. Since the EFL textbooks are taken, taught and conveyed without any modification in order to be compatible with Vietnamese students' learning style, some mismatches which lead to ineffective

consequences are enviable. This is a result from the differences in cultures between Western's and Asia's, specifically "individualism" and "collectivism". Thus, to reduce teacher-student style conflicts, some researchers in ESL/EFL profession advocate teaching and learning styles should be matched (cf. Smith & Renzulli, 1984; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Oxford et al., 1991)

Hofstede (1986) claims that interactions between teachers and learners from different cultures are fundamentally problematic and cross-cultural misunderstandings often occur because classroom interaction is an archetypal human phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the culture of a society (p.303). Hence, effective teaching methods and innovation in teaching, learning as well as developing materials and curricula are extremely imperative as the national project, "2020", is critically reaching its deadline. Lixin Xiao (2006) stated that it is necessary for educators and practitioners to call upon cross-cultural awareness, appropriate pedagogical practice and intercultural communication skills to support the learning process.

### Some Cultural Differences Related to EFL teaching to university students

According to Kaplan (1966), people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds organize discourse differently, in ways that reflect their own language and culture. He (1996) illustrates graphically typical various modes of discourse structure by speakers of several languages as below.



The above graphics demonstrate that the "Oriental" pattern including Vietnamese is an inward turning spiral (Kaplan, 1966). That is viewed as inductive, indirect, and circular approaches to the topic; while the Anglo pattern is linearity, which shows direct. Through many years working with Math students, we realize that the way of thinking in obtaining math knowledge in Viet Nam has something difference with students in another countries because of different cultures.

Moreover, the other researchers (McLoughlin, 1995; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Wang, 1994; Yu, 1996, Wierzbicka, 1990) have explained the influence of cultural thinking patterns on the worldviews, values, behaviors, and language use of ESL/EFL learners. Many linguists hold that the way of thinking in Vietnamese discussed the subject from different angles but in indirect way; while English prefer to present the main point at the beginning. Wierzbicka (1990) states the relationship of language and culture: "*Differences in the ways of speaking prevailing in different societies and different communities are profound and systematic, and reflect the different cultural values*"

In addition, teachers are viewed as authority figures in Vietnam who embodies knowledge. Teachers are expected to impart knowledge to students almost completely and clearly. The students' duty is to acquire knowledge from teachers and obtain wisdom. Some argue that Vietnamese teachers follow by teacher- centeredness rule. The collectivist culture makes

this student not want to bother the teacher's talking and interrupt other students' listening to the teacher in this way. Another shows that Asian students tend to show respect to the teacher, but tend to maintain formal and distant relationships with teachers. In addition, they may see the Western students' frequently interrupting teachers by asking questions in class as rude and not good manners; they are critical of too much informality in the classroom and lack of respect for professors.

In contrast, the American students view the teacher as a facilitator, organizer and friendly critic (Jiang, 2001; Hu, 2001). Student-centeredness is viewed as the main focus in teaching. The individualist cultures are more likely to want to show up in class, to ask questions, give answers, and engage in debate. They are often seen as competitive, while the teachers expect their students to develop independence, engage in dialogue and develop critical thinking (Young, 1994; Toomey, 1985).

In fact, English also has some diversity with the ones in comparison to other fields. Since specialist textbook differs from another textbook in its approach to teaching a concept, various cultures around the world approach computation using different methods. This can cause tremendous frustration and often confusion for students. For instance, there are some procedural challenges that students may encounter in classroom lectures, discussions, and textbooks:

Periods are used instead of commas in some cultures to separate multiples of a thousand (i.e., 1,500,000 could be written as 1.500.000 in Vietnamese culture). Commas are used instead of decimals points in some cultures (i.e., 7.5 could be written as 7,5 in some cultures). Vietnamese students may have difficulty estimating length, weight/mass, and liquid volume using units of measurement that are new to them (inch, foot, yard, ounce, pound, cup, quart) because of the differences in customary system. They may also have difficulty understanding the use of fractions in measurements (i.e., half a foot, quarter of an inch). The metric system does not use fractions with measurement in this way (i.e., 5 millimeters is not described as half a centimeter).

Many students are not familiar with the U.S. monetary system and can have difficulty understanding word problems related to money. They may also have different ways of writing amounts of money (i.e. \$15.00 could be written as \$15,00 in cultures that use commas instead of decimal points).

Some ESP students learn to add, subtract, multiply, and divide using different computational methods than commonly taught in U.S. schools. While some Spanish-speaking countries solve division problems using a different method Vietnamese students use an another way of cognition, like

$$32 \overline{)4} \quad 4 \overline{)32}$$

Teachers make false assumptions and students may make some mistakes in understanding math contexts because of cultural differences in understanding of how mathematics in U.S contexts. Teachers of EFL students can assist the students by being aware of cultural differences so they can understand academic behaviors and performance in the math class.

## **Discussion: Students' needs challenges and innovation in designing EFL curriculum. Students' needs**

According to a survey on undergraduate students' attitudes towards teaching and learning English, which we conducted in 2014 at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, there are some practical results which should be paid a great concern in order to develop the materials and manage classroom successfully:

- Students do recognize the extreme essential of learning English.
- Students still struggle with productive skills such as speaking and writing, especially writing essays, and reports.
- A large number of EFL learners think that listening and speaking are skills which need to be consolidated most and while reading is the least concerned one. In fact, reading is an advantage of most EFL learners because it is what they have practiced over and over again since they started learning English. Meanwhile, listening and speaking are taught in passive ways or neglected sometimes which leads to most students' anxiety whenever it comes to communication.
- In terms of reading, it should be function-oriented. For more specific, reading parts should focus on improving students' weaknesses which is "identifying main ideas through key words".
- Most learners think that they need to self-study more at home, yet the textbooks are yet to satisfy their needs.

### **Innovation in EFL curriculum**

EFL curricula should be specific into two main skills: hard skills and soft skills.

Hard skills in English which are also known as cognitive skills are reading, listening, speaking and writing. These skills are what students have always been cultivating over years at schools and universities. As much as students try their best to approach English hard skills, they are still failed in applying them in pragmatic contexts. Complicated as it may seem, it is not only Vietnam's difficulty but also Asia's which is that students always meet cultural gaps in reading, speaking and writing, due to the differences in learning styles and cultural conceptualizations among countries.

As mentioned previously, for the Western culture is "individualism", their students tend to be more active in learning language as well as other subject. Their textbooks therefore are compiled in active learning styles. Meanwhile Asian culture, particularly Vietnam is "collectivism" which leads to teacher-centre learning style. However, we import textbooks from Western to teach English such as Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, etc. As a result, in English class, teachers made frequent reference to Western perspectives and inside knowledge which leads to reduction of interest in text materials, and contribute to anxiety, which will be compounded by their language deficiency (Li, 2006). Therefore, students may know the language in the textbook yet using it is another matter.

Teaching and learning soft skills in English classes somehow are still unfamiliar with some teachers and learners. According to Azwar Abbas (2013), there are some main types of soft skills:

In terms of communication skills, learners should be able to express well their ideas both in their mother tongue and their foreign language. Also, the abilities to brainstorm critically and debate during discussions or presentations are expected. Confidence and creativity in fact are the two crucial factors which hold the key to successful communication skills. In order to attain those, students should practice their charisma and welcome challenges as well as problem solving whenever it comes to debates or conducting projects. This is a real challenge for Vietnamese in particular and for Asian in general. For they have always followed the teacher- centre teaching style since high schools, passive learning has become their habit. The willing to raise their voice among groups of people is usually discouraged.

In terms of team work, students are expected to work effectively with their peers, most of who may come from different parts of the country or share various cultures, in order to accomplish a projects or a presentation together. Therefore, the ability to cope with difference people without any conflicts is extremely necessary. However, it is sad that students tend to be clumsy at cooperating with their peers, because they are seldom given big projects or task requiring teamwork.

Another important skill which is closely related to teamwork is the leadership skill. For Asian student belong to “collectivism culture” group, which holds back their will to defend for themselves, for their ideas or to take over the group.

What is more, learning should be self-motivated to learn and work autonomously. One of the fastest ways to access and update information is through the internet. Therefore, the capabilities of using computer skills play an important role in lifelong learning and information management skills.

Along with being self-motivated, taking initiate in searching opportunities, which is entrepreneurship skill, is also expected from students. Passive students in fact tend to be lack of this skill which will restrain them from success.

As the demand for employees is becoming more competitive, in order to cope with the hash and challenges, they ought to prepare carefully not only hard skills but also soft skills. Therefore, the responsibility of teachers and learners is to create a micro-society which provides students projects and opportunities to cultivate their soft skills. Moreover, textbooks should be project-oriented so that students can activate their skills as well as active learning environment is generated

### **Some Technical Teaching English**

- Decorate the classroom with seminars in order to help students to accompany with the way of the presentation in mathematics
- Allow EFL students to talk to a partner in their native language when necessary to clarify understanding and clear up misunderstandings.
- Give directions step-by-step (orally and in writing) before assigning students to do independent, pair, or group work. Ask a student to repeat the directions aloud for the rest of the class to assess whether all the students understand the assignment.
- Give EFL students more time to process questions and formulate an answer. They have to think about the question in their native language and then work to find the English

words to produce an answer in English

- An EFL student's hesitance to raise his/her hand to answer a question should not be misinterpreted as shyness. EFL students often have the ability to reason and understand concepts at a much deeper level than they have the vocabulary to express. To minimise the pressure on EFL students, let them discuss a question in pairs for a minute before calling on a student to give an answer. This strategy gives everyone in the class more time to think about the question and form an answer. It also increases comprehension and gives all students more opportunities to participate in class discussions.
- Provide small projects for students to make presentations
- EFL class should not focus only on English, but also on soft skills. Since what EFL class aims for is not just academic knowledge, it should be the place where students' potentials and skills are maximally enhanced. Teachers/ lecturer therefore should create active environment for students to debate, or conduct teamwork. As the result, not only will students be consolidated lessons effectively but also get fascinating involvement in the class. From since, their soft skills such as time management or critical thinking will be boosted.
- Teach students strategies to learn and study terminology new vocabulary (i.e., vocabulary section in specialist notebooks, class word wall, student-made bilingual dictionaries, and/or flashcards on spiral-bound index cards with definition, examples, word used in a sentence, picture/diagram, or a native language translation)
- Sample flashcard:

<b>word</b>	<b>definition</b>
even number	<i>An integer that is divisible by 2.</i>
plane	<i>A surface such that a straight line that joins any two points of the surface</i>
a one-one mapping of A into B	<i>If <math>f</math> is a mapping of A into B such that no member of B is a second term of two ordered pairs in the mapping, then we shall say that <math>f</math> is a one-one mapping of A into B.</i>

- Encourage students to explain their thinking process aloud to a classmate while doing exercises
- Integrate reading and writing through the use of math schedule, math books, and documents from the Internet, etc.
- Teach students to identify key words in reading comprehension that indicate a certain mathematical knowledge
- Give explicit instruction and practice in reading and writing word problems
- Begin class with warm-up activities using mathematical language to give students practice in sentence construction. Write a cloze exercise (a short paragraph with key

words missing) or sentence starters [i.e., *If A is a non-empty set, a function with domain A and with range a set with only one element, is called a / an / the\_\_.* (constant function)] on the board for students to copy and complete when they enter class

- Ask students to paraphrase and write complex concepts in their own words (individually, pairs, groups or whole class)
- Review mathematical vocabulary and concepts before explaining new unit
- Use visuals whenever possible to reinforce auditory instruction (i.e., charts, graphs, manipulative, diagrams, models, real objects)
- Use graphic organizers to visually represent mathematical concepts. Vary groupings throughout the lesson (i.e., independent work, pair work, small groups, and whole class)
- Use real-life problem-solving situations to teach new concepts.

### Assessment Strategies

#### *Before instruction*

- Use daily warm-up activities to assess mastery of concepts from the previous day's lesson
- Assess EFL students' knowledge before beginning a unit of study to learn where students have gaps in their learning and avoid unnecessary re-teaching of concepts. Some good techniques are semantic webbing and recording students' comments on a KWL chart. Listed below is an example of a KWL chart

What Do You <b>K</b> now	What Do You <b>W</b> ant to Know	What Did You <b>L</b> earn
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#### *During instruction*

- Use a variety of assessment methods to measure English comprehension and mastery of concepts (drawings, charts, demonstrations, diagrams)
- Do quick checks for understanding every day (i.e., thumbs up/down, write answers on wipe boards at desks, hold up manipulatives)
- Observe and record ESP students' participation in small group activities.

#### *After instruction*

- Find alternate ways other than written tests for EFL students to show their comprehension (i.e., oral tests, diagrams, drawings, demonstrations)
- Give EFL students (especially beginners) alternate ways to participate in whole-class discussions and respond to questions (think/pair/share, flashcards to raise over head, hand and/or body movements, individual chalkboards for solving computations)
- Assess whether EFL students have mastered general concepts rather than their English grammar and fluency

### **Some Strategies for designing textbooks**

First of all, reading and writing should be consolidated. What is more, it should be function-oriented. For more specific, reading parts should focus on improving students' weaknesses which are "identifying main ideas through key words" (result from the survey). Moreover, vocabulary check-up test should be given regularly so students themselves can see their progress. One more thing is that, there should be phonetics transcription besides the vocabulary list. Therefore, it may help students to get better at their pronunciation. In addition, reading passage could include sample essays, reports in order to arouse students' interest and enhance their writing skill. Furthermore, to encourage students to read, there should be lively and fascinating illustrations. For writing, it should focus on tips and practice tasks of writing reports and writing essays – the two main situations which students use their writing skill most (result from the survey).

One of the important features is that, speaking section should be received special concern. Since speaking is the nightmare for EFL, it is not astonishing that there should be more speaking activities in the EFL course. For instance, they can be presentations, projects, or discussions in class. Apparently, Games are what students look forward most. Moreover, according to their expectation, "stress-free" outdoors activity should be organized in order to help them review the lessons and practice speaking. What is more, in order to motivate students to keep on learning English, and create a vibrant EFL playing-field, Clubs and competitions may be practical solutions.

Finally, the syllabus should also be self-studied oriented. Therefore, students can make use their course book effectively at any time and everywhere. This may require changes in the exercise organization. Yet, we propose there should be more vocabulary list and reading passages for students to self-practice at home. As a matter of fact, computer assisted Language Learning (CALL) would become a breakthrough achievement if it was applied in EFL teaching and learning. Thus, there would be no space or time limit and student could self-study at home or everywhere and anytime they like. All it takes are a website with authentic resource, catchy well-designed, and teacher instructions. Material, practice tests, or even EFL forums can be included in order to help students relieve stress, get interested in EFL and consolidate lessons.

### **Some Strategies for learning English**

Learners should be more active in studying not only English but also cultures. This in fact requires an open- mind and internal motivation to widen one's knowledge. What is more, learners should practice asking "why?" every time it comes to cultural gaps. For instance, "why Vietnamese always greet each other by saying "have you eaten anything" but Western do not". By keeping one wondering and curious, learning English will become more fascinating and informative.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper showed that cultural differences, language backgrounds, and educational experiences in EFL/ESP classes are the three major aspects that influence math students to obtain EFL/ESP. This work documents our investigation of the effects of collaborative instruction in an undergraduate EFL class at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy



with regard to language proficiency of learners and their attitude toward language learning. Our these applications for the EFL teaching show that the experimental class which is taught by this method had a more positive attitude and much more motivation toward English learning until the end of the academic year.

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