VIETNAMESE CULTURE OF LEARNING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

VĂN HÓA HỌC CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT NAM VÀ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐỐI VỚI GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Vietnamese culture of learning and its implications for English language education. It explores how cultural, social, and historical factors have shaped educational practices in Vietnam, particularly in the context of foreign language teaching. By focusing on the impact of Confucian values such as respect for authority, teacher-centeredness, and examination-oriented learning, the article highlights how these traditional cultural norms influence English language teaching and learning in the Vietnamese context. Additionally, it addresses the challenges faced by educators in balancing these values with modern pedagogical approaches like learner-centered and communicative language teaching. The article concludes by suggesting strategies for integrating Vietnamese cultural values with global teaching practices to enhance English language education in Vietnam.

Keywords: *Cultures of learning, Vietnam education practices, foreign language education, English learning and teaching*

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo này phân tích văn hóa học của người Việt Nam và những ảnh hưởng đối với việc dạy và học tiếng Anh. Nội dung chính tập trung vào sự ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố văn hóa, xã hội và lịch sử đối với giáo dục Việt Nam, đặc biệt trong giảng dạy ngoại ngữ. Thông qua việc phân tích các giá trị Nho giáo như sự tôn trọng giáo viên, dạy học lấy giáo viên làm trung tâm và học theo định hướng thi/kiểm tra, bài báo nêu bật sự ảnh hưởng của những chuẩn mực văn hóa truyền thống này đối với việc dạy và học tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam. Ngoài ra, bài báo cũng đề cập đến những thách thức mà giáo viên phải đối mặt trong việc cân bằng các giá trị này với các phương pháp sư phạm hiện đại như giảng dạy lấy người học làm trung tâm và giảng dạy ngôn ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp. Bài báo đưa ra khuyến nghị rằng cần kết hợp phù hợp các giá trị văn hóa Việt Nam với các phương pháp, cách tiếp cận giảng dạy mới trên thế giới nhằm nâng cao chất lượng giáo dục tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *Văn hóa học tập, thực tiễn giáo dục Việt Nam, giáo dục ngoại ngữ, dạy và học tiếng Anh.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultures of learning provides a valuable framework for understanding how broader cultural, social, and historical contexts shape educational practices. A culture of learning encompasses the collective norms, values, beliefs, and practices that influence how education is perceived and conducted within a particular society. Cultural characteristics significantly shape educational practices, including the teaching and learning foreign languages.

This article explores the Vietnamese culture of learning and examines its impact on educational practices, particularly in the context of foreign language education. Understanding these cultural influences is essential for comprehending how foreign languages, especially English, are taught and learned in Vietnam.

By examining the historical evolution of foreign language education in Vietnam, with a focus on the impact of political and policy changes, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of language teaching and learning in the country. This contextual analysis will shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by educators and learners in Vietnam's dynamic educational landscape, and how the interplay of cultural and political factors continues to shape foreign language education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cultures of Learning

'Cultures of learning', as a concept, was first defined by Martin Cortazzi and Lixian Jin, who

have now researched and published in this area for in excess of twenty years. In their 2013 publication, the concept is extensively explored. They argue that "learning is cultural: Members of different cultural communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values and beliefs about how to learn or how to teach" [1]. A solid grasp of these elements can elucidate the prevalent teaching and learning practices within a specific culture. The authors indicate that these cultural notions are frequently internalized subconsciously through childhood experiences within the family and subsequently in the broader community. They also emphasize the relevance of this concept in educational settings that are international and multicultural [1]. This is particularly important as this study focuses on English instruction for multilingual and multicultural communication in HEIs in Vietnam.

2.2. The Vietnamese culture

In order to effectively explain and explore the Vietnamese culture of learning, it is crucial to first understand the core values and influences that have historically shaped and continue to influence Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese culture is viewed as a combination of its native traditions and external influences [2]. As shown in Figure 1, Vietnamese culture is made up of five primary value layers. These are traditional values, Confucian and Taoist values, Buddhist values, Western values and Socialist values.
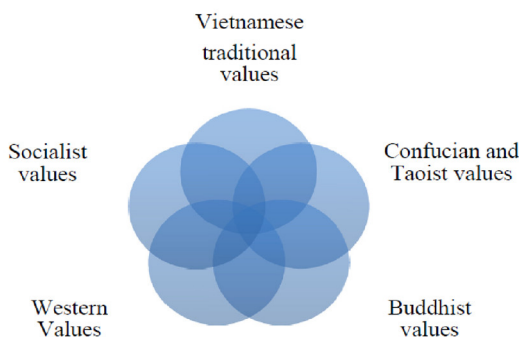

Figure 1. Multi-layers of Vietnamese values system (Note. Reprinted from [2])

It is widely acknowledged that patriotism plays a significant role in Vietnamese traditional values [2, 3, 4]. This sense of national pride is expressed in various ways, such as the commitment to protecting sovereignty, maintaining cultural identity, and contributing to the nation's development [5]. In addition to patriotism, Vietnamese people have traditionally been characterized as hardworking, innovative, optimistic, compassionate, and dedicated [6].

Alongside traditional values, foreign influences have shaped Vietnamese culture, with Confucianism being one of the most significant. While many countries in the region have been impacted by Indian culture, Vietnam has been strongly influenced by China [7]. One clear example of this is the pervasive presence of Confucianism in Vietnamese society.

During over a thousand years of Chinese domination (from 111 B.C. to 907), historical accounts indicate that the Vietnamese consistently resisted their occupiers, with numerous rebellions taking place [8]. However, lacking a strong alternative ideology, state structure, and administrative system, subsequent Vietnamese dynasties adopted Confucianism to guide their governance and statecraft [9]. Education, in particular, was deeply influenced by China, with the use of Chinese characters being essential as the Vietnamese language had no indigenous script at the time [8]. Nguyen [9] emphasizes that "Confucianism is the most important source helping to shape the national traditional identity" (p.1). Although official support for Confucianism has waned in recent Vietnamese history, "its practice is still common among government bureaucrats and leaders" [10].

Confucianism, an ancient tradition, remains vibrant and continues to develop, manifesting differently across nations. In Vietnam, Confucianism cannot merely be seen as the original philosophy of the Chinese occupiers; although its principles endure, they have been adapted and expanded long after the end of Chinese colonization [11]. Goodman [12] highlights that "the Vietnamese view of the world and how it works, of family and society and the roles of its members, and of concepts of duty and virtue, all bore a heavy resemblance to Confucian interpretation of life" (p. 31). As a result, the Vietnamese are often driven by a desire for learning, reputation, and mutual respect. Taoism, another Chinese philosophy, has also contributed values to Vietnamese culture. By embracing Taoist ideals of harmony with others and nature, the Vietnamese are generally seen as peace-loving and tolerant [2]. Additionally, Buddhism, which originated in India, has long been a fundamental element of Vietnamese culture [13], enhancing virtues like kindness, tolerance, and compassion.

Western ideals such as liberty, equality, and democracy, introduced by colonial powers like France and America, have also played a role in shaping Vietnam's value system. During the French colonization period (1858-1945), Vietnam was influenced by French culture.

However, unlike other colonial powers, the French did not enforce an aggressive assimilation policy [14]. They instead recognized differences in race, culture, and ethnicity, guided by their republican universalist beliefs. The French also contributed to the development of written communication in Vietnam through the creation of *Chữ quốc ngữ* (the Romanized script) by a French missionary, allowing the Vietnamese to write in their own language rather than using the Chinese-based *Chữ Nôm* [8]. Nevertheless, French educational opportunities were limited to a minority, as most of the population remained illiterate. The second Western power to arrive in Vietnam was the United States in 1955, with a focus on curbing communist influence. As a result of this interaction, certain Western educational values gained prominence.

A significant influence in shaping Vietnamese culture comes from the socialist values promoted by the Vietnamese government. Notably, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's first president, introduced ideas of what an independent Vietnam should embody, drawing from his education and experiences in France. Later, Vietnam adopted socialist models from the USSR and China. Over time, Vietnam's socialism has evolved to prioritize values such as independence, freedom, happiness, democracy, justice, and civilization [15]. These values integrate with both traditional and foreign influences, forming the comprehensive Vietnamese value system.

2.3. Vietnamese Culture of Learning

Vietnamese culture, shaped by multiple influences, has resulted in educational practices that reflect various values. Some educational approaches have been influential for extended periods, while others were short-lived. The idea of taking responsibility for one's learning became popular during French colonization [16] and the active learning approach was introduced to southern Vietnam by American troops [17]. However, these Western approaches did not gain lasting traction due to widespread illiteracy and incompatibility with the government's socialist values, which emphasize collectivism.

The Vietnamese culture of learning is significantly influenced by Confucianism, owing to prolonged Chinese influence. Key characteristics of a Vietnamese culture of learning impacted by Confucian values are as follows.

2.3.1. High Respect for Teachers

In Confucian philosophy, education is highly valued, and teachers hold a prestigious social status [19, 20]. Traditionally, Vietnamese teachers are revered, often considered even more important than parents. Famous sayings and idioms reflect this respect, such as "*Một chữ là thầy, nửa chữ cũng là thầy*" [Who teaches you one word is your teacher; who teaches you half a word is also your teacher] and "*Không thầy đố mày làm nên*" [One cannot do anything without a teacher]. The Education Law [21] emphasizes that teachers are crucial for ensuring education quality and should continuously update their knowledge and set good examples for students.

Vietnamese education aims to nurture well-rounded students with both knowledge and morality. Schools prioritize educating well-behaved students alongside imparting knowledge. Moral lessons are integrated into foreign language classrooms, with teachers maintaining a morality-related identity and embedding moral values in their practice [22]. This suggests that English classes can be culturally 'Vietnam-centric,' impacting the effectiveness of teaching English for multilingual and multicultural communication.

Vietnamese teachers, while respected, bear the burden of being role models and 'know-it-alls.' In a study by Phuong-Mai et al. [23], nearly 500 Vietnamese students supported the idea that teachers should always have the right answers. This right-or-wrong view of answers influences language teaching, focusing on forms of the target language [24]. However, teaching language as social practice [24] is more challenging, and language classrooms need to address meaning complexities.

2.3.2. Teacher-Centeredness

In Confucian-influenced education, knowledge is delivered and learned rather than constructed by learners [1, 25, 26]. The teacher dominates the learning process, with students seeking a good teacher and mimicking their words or deeds [27]. Students are motivated to acquire knowledge through attentiveness [28], exclusively listening to and agreeing with the teacher. Arguing with teachers is seen as rude and unacceptable.

Nevertheless, this conventional method faces challenges due to the necessity of more explicitly addressing learner needs, roles, and responsibilities in the curriculum. O'Neill and McMahon [29] highlight key features of a learner-centered approach, including significant student choice, engagement, and empowerment. Encouraging active and independent learning has been central to Vietnam's education development strategies [30, 31]. Chu [32] discovered that the majority of tertiary EFL teachers in Vietnam have embraced this Western-originated teaching method.

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, introduced in the early 1990s, is believed to remedy Vietnamese students' inability to use English communicatively [33, 34] However, challenges persist due to teachers' preferences for traditional approaches, student and parent expectations, large class sizes, and poor teaching conditions [35]. Additionally, teachers' uncertainty about what communicative activities involve and lack of understanding of communicative competence further complicate CLT implementation [35].

2.3.3. Competition and Examinations

Confucian educational philosophy also values competition and examinations as crucial elements of learning. This system prioritizes rote learning and memorization, with high-stakes exams determining students' future opportunities [36]. The examination system encourages students to focus on achieving high scores rather than developing practical skills. This emphasis on exams can hinder the implementation of communicative language teaching methods, which require more interactive and participatory learning approaches.

2.3.4. Respect for Authority and Collectivism

Vietnamese culture highly values respect for authority and collectivism. These values influence classroom dynamics, where students often defer to teachers' authority and prioritize group harmony over individual expression. This respect for authority can limit students' willingness to participate in class discussions or challenge teachers' viewpoints, which are essential for developing critical thinking and communicative competence in English.

2.4. English Language Education in Vietnam

The recent history of foreign language education in Vietnam began in 1945 when the country declared its independence. Foreign language preferences have always been influenced by political circumstances, social contexts, and foreign policy requirements. During the period from 1945 to 1954, Chinese and French were the dominant languages due to the influence of colonial powers and close ties with China. After the country was divided in 1954, foreign language education reflected the political division. In the North, Chinese and Russian were prioritized, reflecting Vietnam's alignment with the Soviet Union and China, while in the South, French and English competed for dominance as the region maintained closer ties with Western powers [37, 38].

Russian emerged as the most significant foreign language in Vietnam between 1975 and 1986, following the reunification of the country and its alignment with the Soviet bloc [38].

The rapid expansion of English began with the initiation of the Doi Moi (renovation) policy in the mid-1980s. This policy marked a turning point in Vietnam's history as it opened the economy to international markets and reformed its foreign relations, moving away from isolation towards integration into the global economy. The Doi Moi policy led to significant economic reforms, reducing bureaucratic centralism and promoting liberalization. These economic changes fueled a growing demand for English, which quickly became essential for communication with foreign investors, international organizations, and the global market [39]. As a result, the 1990s saw a proliferation of English language centers and schools, reflecting the increasing importance of English proficiency for securing well-paid jobs and advancing in professional careers [40].

Over the past three decades, English has remained the dominant foreign language in Vietnam, widely chosen by students at all levels of education. This shift has also been supported by government policies promoting English as a key tool for international integration and national development, further solidifying its status as the most important foreign language in the country. Vietnam has been making significant efforts to improve English proficiency and establish it as a second language in schools as part of its broader educational reforms. The National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) 2008-2020, and its extension through 2025, aims to enhance English language teaching and learning across all levels of education. Key initiatives include improving English curriculum, integrating English as a core subject from primary school, and focusing on communicative language teaching methods to develop practical language skills. The government also prioritizes teacher training programs to elevate the English proficiency of educators.

Remarkably, it is emphasised by the Vietnamese Politburo in the Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW on the continued implementation of Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW [41] those educational institutions of all levels need to "promote international integration, focusing on improving the foreign language proficiency of students, and gradually making English the second language in schools". This direction reflects a strategic effort to integrate the country more deeply into the global

economy and international community. By prioritizing English language education, the government acknowledges the role of English as a critical skill for global competitiveness, modernization, and international collaboration. The success of this policy will likely depend on the ability to reform existing structures, provide robust teacher training, and ensure sufficient resources to support the shift toward a more communicative and practical use of English in daily life and professional settings.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF VIETNAMESES LEARNING CULTURE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The Vietnamese culture of learning, shaped by a unique blend of traditional values and modern influences, significantly impacts the teaching and learning of English in HEIs in Vietnam. Core elements such as respect for teachers, teacher-centeredness, competition, examinations, respect for authority, and collectivism continue to shape educational practices. These cultural characteristics, while valuable in certain contexts, can present challenges when it comes to adopting more learner-centered and communicative language teaching methods.

3.1. Teacher-Centeredness and Student-Centered Learning

The deeply ingrained respect for teachers in Vietnamese culture fosters an educational environment where teachers are seen as authoritative figures and primary sources of knowledge. This teacher-centered approach, which emphasizes lectures and passive learning, contrasts sharply with learner-centered approaches that prioritize student engagement, critical thinking, and interaction-key principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Implementing learner-centered strategies can be difficult in this context, as teachers may fear losing respect or control in the classroom. However, striking a balance between maintaining authority and fostering student independence is crucial. Professional development programs focusing on active learning strategies, collaborative activities, and facilitative teaching can empower teachers to make this transition, enabling students to engage more dynamically with the language.

3.2. Examination Pressure and Communicative Competence

The emphasis on examinations, often focused on rote memorization and grammar rules, poses another challenge. Vietnam's exam-oriented culture places significant pressure on both students and teachers to prioritize test preparation over practical language use. This focus hinders the development of communicative competence, as students often lack opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and interacting in real-life contexts. Reforming the assessment system is essential to address this issue. Including assessments that measure communicative competence, such as oral exams, role-plays, and group discussions, could shift focus from memorization to practical language skills. Such reforms would better align with global trends in English language teaching and learning.

3.3. Respect for Authority and Classroom Participation

Respect for authority is a hallmark of Vietnamese society, and this extends into the classroom, where students may hesitate to question or challenge their teachers. This deference can discourage open dialogue, critical thinking, and the kind of interaction necessary for effective language learning. Similarly, the collectivist nature of Vietnamese culture may lead students to prioritize group harmony over individual expression, making them reluctant to speak up or stand out. To foster a more participative classroom environment, teachers can gradually encourage individual expression by integrating discussion-based activities, debates, and peer feedback sessions. These methods can help students build confidence in expressing their opinions and ideas in English while respecting cultural values.

3.4. Bridging Cultural Values with Modern Pedagogical Practices

The interplay of these cultural factors requires a nuanced approach to educational reform. While adopting international pedagogical practices is essential for equipping students with the skills needed in a globalized world, it is equally important to respect and integrate traditional Vietnamese values. Teachers can create hybrid approaches that incorporate both respect for authority and collectivism with modern, communicative teaching methods. For example, group-based activities and peer teaching can help balance collectivism with opportunities for individual participation. Additionally, fostering a classroom culture that encourages curiosity, dialogue, and mutual respect can support students in transitioning towards a more interactive and communicative learning model.

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding the Vietnamese culture of learning is crucial for effectively teaching English in HEIs in Vietnam.

The cultural values of high respect for teachers, teacher-centeredness, competition, examinations, and respect for authority and collectivism shape educational practices and students' learning experiences. The traditional values that shape Vietnamese education are not necessarily at odds with the goals of communicative language teaching. However, thoughtful adaptation is required to blend respect for teachers and authority with the need for more student-centered and interactive methods. Addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by the Vietnamese culture of learning can support students in developing the skills needed for successful communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This transformation will involve changes at both the classroom level-through innovative teaching practices-and at the institutional level, with reforms in teacher training and assessment. By fostering an environment that encourages participation, critical thinking, and practical communication, Vietnamese institutions can better prepare students for the demands of English in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

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