Part 1 of this article, published in our November 2004 issue, had finished by discussing the Vietnamese classroom virtues of “sympathy” and “strictness.” The discussion continues here with further consideration of how these values play out in the classroom.

Strictness and Sympathy In the Classroom

Situations and Responses

These situations were based on lists of problems and scenarios provided by Vietnamese teachers. The responses are quoted from interviews with fourth-year students.

Situation 1: You are a new English teacher. There is one very gifted student in your 12th grade class. She has been studying English for seven years. Her family is very rich, and she has many language learning resources—tapes, videos, magazines, and books in English. She also took extra classes from a foreign teacher at a Foreign Language Center to improve her listening and speaking. She is very proud of her English ability. Sometimes in class she asks questions you do not know the answer to. You suspect she is trying to embarrass you or make you look stupid. What would you do?

Response: First, I can praise the student who ask question for their longing to get to know more about the subject. And after that, I should talk to the class that the question doesn’t belong to the lesson they are studying now and there isn’t enough time to answer the question at that time. And I will tell the student who ask the question to meet me after class.

[When we meet] I will tell her that “I always encourage all of you to improve your knowledge by listening to the tape or reading further, or anything to improve your skill. It is good, and I always encourage. But, it is not good if you show off your knowledge in a boastful attitude. Especially toward me. I am your teacher, and a teacher is not a dictionary, so the teacher cannot know everything. If I don’t know something I will try to look it up for you, but you should come to ask me after class because the questions you ask are too difficult for the normal student and take too much time to explain. My main aim for the lesson is to give the universal knowledge to all the members in the class. If I only answer the question to you, the other students will be not successful in their class.”

Of course I will research more materials and overview my knowledge so that I can improve my ability to answer her.

Situation 2: One new student in your class is rather unattractive and awkward. He has some trouble socializing with the other students. Yet he is very hardworking and eager to participate in your class. He often volunteers to answer questions even though the other students laugh at his poor pronunciation. One day, you want to do group work in your class and you put him in a group with three girls who are excellent students and close friends. The girls look annoyed. One girl comes over to you and quietly asks if you can please put the boy in a different group. You already know that no one else in the class really wants to work with him either. So you disagree and quietly tell the student that the boy will be in her group for today’s lesson. She goes back to her group and begins working. However, whenever the boy tries to say something, the girl and her friends ignore him. Eventually they turn their backs to him and do not include him in any of their conversation. What would you do?

Response to the group: I will stand nearby to this group; therefore they must communicate to him. Whenever he says something that is good, I will praise him. If it is not good, I will say nothing. By doing so, the other members may realize that he is not very bad as they acted towards him.

Response to the whole class: I think this situation usually happen in reality. And, the situation is rather
difficult, but I think I will tell the class a story about a borse and a donkey. The donkey and the borse both belong to a boss, they have to carry a lot of goods on their back. And, because the donkey have to carry more and the borse don’t have to carry very much, the donkey asked the borse to carry a little more. And the borse disagree with him. And, after that, because of having to carry too much, the donkey become exhausting and died. And all the goods was loaded to the borse. And the lesson from this story is that if you don’t help the weak, you will have more trouble and sadness for yourself in the end. And I will tell them that we should learn from the way he is so hard-working and eager in the class. And, he can learn from you to improve his English ability and pronunciation. We must to work together to achieve the mutual benefit.

**Situation 3:** You have a student who is very well behaved and hardworking, but not very good at learning English. She comes to your house a month before her exam and brings you an envelope. She asks you to please “help” her because her parents will be so disappointed and angry with her if she fails the exam. What would you do?

**Response:** I think the “help” in quotation marks is popular these days. Of course I don’t receive the envelope, because that is not the “help” for her. But, if I do like that, I will do the bad thing for her. Because she is a student, so maybe she is immature; and if I do like that, I will damage the character of a growing child. And I will say to her that, “You have good behavior, so you are not stupid. A person who have good behavior is usually very wise. And I think a month is maybe enough time for you to improve your knowledge and pass the exam because you are very hardworking. So, you should bring this envelope to home; and if you really want to make your parents happy, you should try to study. And, whenever you need help, I will help you.” And I can explain for her the things she doesn’t understand. And I can help her to find a better way to study and a better way to review the lessons well.

**Situation 4:** A few of the students in your class are from very poor families, so they must work after school to help their families. They do not have time to study like the other students in the class. Often, they do not do their homework and cannot answer your questions in the class. What would you do?

**Response within class:** Of course, with poor students, I feel emotion for them. Firstly, I will come to their house to find out about their conditions. And then, I will hold a meeting with the leaders of my class to ask them if they know the situation of their friends. And if they don’t know, I will tell them. I will ask them to plan to help them. Maybe they have to send some excellent students in the class to help them revise and learn the lessons in the break time between lessons. And, they should plan to send some other students to come to their home in the free time to help them with their work so that the poor students can have more time for studying. I will also ask some students from good families to help me to get the books or some money so that we can support them to study.

**Response to poor students and families:** I will meet the poor students at another time and tell them that I sympathize with their situation and that they needn’t be ashamed. I will tell them that they are very good person because they are responsible for his family. But, in the future, they will be better if they are responsible for their life by studying hard. I will talk with them that the only way to improve your problem is to study. When you study well, you will have a good job in the future, and at that time you will improve your life and you can help your family very much. I think you will help them the most if you try to do this. I will help you, and your classmates will help you. Please do not be discouraged, and we will try to help you to overcome your difficulties.

Also, I will meet with the students’ parents. Firstly, I will compliment and praise them because they pay money and try to let their children come to school. This means that they love their child and must make sacrifices to pay the school fees and tuition. Maybe because of this, I know that they think education has importance. But, I will also tell them that if the child attend school, he also needs some time to study, because now he is too tired and busy, so he can’t learn well. I will ask them for sending some good students to their home to help them sometimes. Also, I tell that working only solves the problem now, immediately, but not in the future. If their son has no knowledge, so he cannot find a good job to help his family more and more. I think they will be willing for me and the other students to help them for the sake of they love their son so much.

**Situation 5:** Some of your students are very talkative in class. They often read magazines or chat in Vietnamese about topics that are not relevant to the lesson. Every time you turn around to write on the chalkboard, you hear a lot of talking. What should you do?
Response: Of course I want to say that I feel so angry with them; but I will not express my emotion, because I think that I must think first about my methods. If the students don’t pay much attention to my lesson, I have to look again to see if my lesson is boring or not. Because, once the students get involved to the lesson, they don’t have time to talk with everyone around. Because I am too strict, I will also punish them if they don’t obey me. First, I will scold the students who behave badly. Maybe I will make them stand up and talk in English about the subject they are talking about in Vietnamese. Probably this is difficult for them, so they will be embarrassed, and I will give them a bad mark if they can’t speak fluently. Or, I can ask them to write answers to some difficult questions about the lesson. I will take their papers and mark them seriously. If they don’t do well, they will get low mark. After several times of doing this, they know that they must pay attention to the lessons.

Situation 6: You teach at a Foreign Language Center. Your Center offers special examinations—English Levels 1, 2, and 3. Many of your students are taking the exam because they need to get into the next level in order to get a job, or to get a promotion in the job they are in. So the exam is quite important for their future. Each student will receive either a “Passing” or a “Failing” grade. You will give the exam, but other teachers will grade it. You feel that the exam that you must give is very unfair. It is not appropriate for the level of the students, but is instead far too difficult. You also know that many other teachers will be “helping” their students by providing some of the answers for them. You are afraid that if you do not “help” your students, they will be the only ones to fail. You feel that their English is at the same level as the students in the other classes who will be receiving “help.” So it would be unfair to your students if all the other students appear to be much better than them. What would you do?

Response: I think in Vietnam, usually have like this. So, in the examination I can act like the thing the situation requires me to do. If the test is too difficult, I will give prompts to my students. And, it depends on them. If she is very good, she will only need a little help like that. If it is bad student, even with the prompts, be still does not know the answer. In this situation I will fail him if his level is far, far too low. So, I will help them, but not give the direct answer. We can give some hints or prompts. Also, the students who work very hard may have more assist from me. I don’t like this way, but I have to do like other people.

Analysis

Although many cultural distinctives could be explored through these scenarios and responses, I have chosen to single out the following:

- **Privacy is not emphasized.** Teachers are not expected to conceal their knowledge about students’ family or economic situations, but may freely express them to other students or parents in seeking help.
- **Assessment can be used as a tool for punishment.** It is perfectly acceptable and even expected that teachers will assess students and assign low grades in order to punish lazy students and motivate them to work harder.
- **One must accept and work with institutionally imposed guidelines.** This was notable in the final scenario involving testing. Every interviewee expressed dissatisfaction with the situation. However, each concluded that she had no choice other than to help the students. No one recommended requesting a change in the exam system.

I further explored the acceptance of institutionally imposed guidelines by returning to several of the interviewees. I asked if, in Situation 6, they would consider gathering other teachers who were also unhappy with the system to meet with the administration to request a more appropriate test, or to offer, as a committee of teachers aware of learners’ actual levels, to write such a test. The respondents said they would not do this for fear of angering the administration. One respondent concluded, “We haven’t the right to complain. We only have the right to obey.”

**Teachers are not expected to conceal their knowledge about students’ family or economic situations, but may freely express them to other students or parents in seeking help.**
**Interviews With Vietnamese Teachers**

The goal of these interviews was to view from Vietnamese teachers' perspectives the differences between their own teaching and the teaching of Westerners, and to gather suggestions for foreigners seeking to adapt to Vietnamese educational settings. Initially, teachers expressed their own values regarding the characteristics of a good teacher. These closely paralleled the student views collected in Cycle One. Every teacher interviewed mentioned knowledge as the most important characteristic of a good teacher, and good teaching methodology as a secondary characteristic. Additionally, three teachers mentioned sympathy, and two mentioned strictness. Two also mentioned that a good teacher must love students and love her profession.

Teachers connected these views with Vietnamese traditions through the concept of “losing face.” They felt that being knowledgeable as a teacher was a cultural value closely connected with the fear of “losing face” before one’s students by being unable to answer a question. It was also noted that famous scholars in Vietnamese history were known for their consideration of or sympathy toward their followers. Strictness was also praised as a traditional virtue. One interviewee noted: “This [strictness] is traditional. As for my case, I had strict teachers when I were at school, and when I was at college. And I admired the teachers who had good knowledge as well as strictness. They had a good influence on me.”

In my questioning of Vietnamese teachers regarding the differences between their view of a good teacher and a more Western view, several of the teachers said, “I think it is the same,” or “I think there is no difference.” Two teachers said they could not really answer this question because they had never been abroad or had a foreign teacher themselves. One teacher who has worked extensively with both Vietnamese and foreign teachers felt that the biggest difference was in the way teachers are expected to be considerate of their students.

According to this teacher’s analysis, Western teachers are expected to be considerate by paying attention to the learning styles, expectations, or academic concerns of their students. They express sympathy and consideration for students through attention to academic issues. But they are not expected to know the social or family circumstances of their learners. Vietnamese teachers, on the other hand, plan their teaching with no concern for learning styles or student input. Rather, they express sympathy by being aware of social, family, and economic conditions of students, and by advising or assisting them in these areas.

In terms of differences in classroom style, most Vietnamese teachers felt that Western teaching methodology is different, perhaps more creative and less curriculum-bound. Foreign teachers focus on parts of the curriculum they feel are most essential, and supplement the curriculum with extra activities. Several teachers noted that they cannot teach this way because in Vietnam syllabus design is imposed and must be followed exactly. For most teachers, deviation from a curriculum is impossible because they do not write their own tests, but simply prepare students for ones given by the school. Teachers were also asked about potential problems that could arise in a foreign teacher’s classroom. Most of the problems mentioned were linked to students’ passivity, lack of creativity, or inability to express themselves clearly in English.

Teachers then advised that foreign teachers who want to be successful in Vietnam should focus on developing a good relationship with the teaching staff and their students. They also strongly recommended that a new foreign teacher observe several classes taught by Vietnamese instructors in order to understand ability levels and Vietnamese student-teacher interaction patterns. All the teachers felt that foreign teachers should make an effort to understand Vietnamese history, culture, traditions, and language. A final recommendation was that foreign teachers should make every effort to be aware of the purposes of the courses they teach. They should realize that “fluency” may not be the goal of every course. They should find out what skills the school expects them to teach students.

**E-Mail Interviews With Foreign Teachers in Vietnam**

The purpose of these e-mail interviews was to determine what cultural differences foreign teachers may have experienced in teaching in Vietnam, and to understand steps they have taken to reconcile misunderstandings these differences may have caused.

First, these foreign teachers, all of whom were American, were asked what they believe to be the most important characteristics of a good teacher. Their responses are summarized in Figure 1. After identifying their own views, foreign teachers were asked to comment on ways in which they thought their own ideals
regarding a good teacher might differ from their students’ views. An overwhelming majority focused on the topic of knowledge, with a few comments regarding error correction as well. Quoted sample responses:

Most students believe that a teacher is a fountain of knowledge and their main responsibility is to pass on that knowledge to the student. Basically, a teacher should know everything...They are not as concerned about learning to be independent learners as they are about simply having the information that they need to transfer to the exam.

I think my students think that a teacher needs to be incredibly knowledgeable—nearly all-knowing!!!

I’m under the impression that Vietnamese students view a good teacher as a strict teacher—one who carries all the knowledge and imparts some of that knowledge to the quiet, respectful students who sit there waiting to absorb it.

Students in Vietnam think a good teacher knows all the answers and pours their knowledge into them. The whole philosophy is that they are empty cups and the teacher is the teapot waiting to pour into them. A good teacher is strict. Her/his teaching should be flawless, without any errors.

My students think that a good teacher would correct them every time they make a mistake.

My students think that a good teacher should correct every mistake constantly and teach the same way they have been taught all their lives. And I feel that a good teacher should equip them with the skills to think critically and to use a variety of tools (hopefully, this includes their brains) so they can correct themselves and explore different possible answers to their questions.

In addition, respondents were asked to describe ways in which their classroom behavior or style differed significantly from that of their Vietnamese colleagues. The most frequently occurring responses were:

• Their classroom behavior is more humorous (entertaining, funny, silly) than that of their Vietnamese colleagues.
• Their classroom behavior is more casual (friendly, open, informal) than that of their Vietnamese colleagues.
• Their methodology requires a great deal more participation and interaction from students. In particular, they ask for more oral communication in English than Vietnamese teachers expect.
The teachers also described potential problems that could arise from these cultural differences. Many of them noted that students may wrongly equate “fun” with “easy” or think that because they are enjoying themselves they are not learning. Some students may be resistant to communicative activities or group work because they feel they can learn only from the teacher. Such students may feel that if the teacher is not lecturing, she is not fulfilling her teaching responsibilities or they may think that they can be lazy because of the more relaxed classroom atmosphere.

These same foreign teachers also explained ways they have adapted their teaching to meet their students’ expectations and address these problems:

I lecture more—I find that giving students specific information every class keeps them from viewing the lesson as a “play session” where the students may feel they are learning nothing concrete.

I have lectured more and prepared well outside of class for possible questions the students might ask me.

I make sure that lecture and note-taking precede any and all communicative activities. If students don’t have notes in their notebook, they feel they haven’t learned anything. At the beginning of the next class, I orally “drill” them on what they should have learned from the communicative activity the week before. This drilling serves two purposes. First, it proves to them that they have indeed “learned” something. Secondly, it helps to prepare them for the exam. When I plan each lesson, I ask myself, “How would I test students on this?” Then my weekly review questions reflect potential exam questions. This is important because students are so exam-focused in Vietnam. My students know that review questions at the beginning of class may be on the exam, so it motivates them to come to class on time and alleviates some of their fears about how the exam will relate to the fun games they played in class.

Many of the Vietnamese students respect strict classroom structure and are less familiar and perhaps less comfortable with creative lessons. While teaching in Vietnam, I’ve had to use more drills and follow books more closely for their benefit. I haven’t been able to make my lessons as communicative as I’d like. I’ve also had to realize that a teacher in Vietnam is seen as the ONLY one with the knowledge. Therefore, the students don’t see the value of independent or peer learning. I must accept this philosophy and stretch it only gradually when it is most useful to student learning.

Teaching grammar: everybody’s classic, ‘Don’t want to, but I will.’ After all, the students are tested on it.

I have found that students like the interaction and constructive learning activities; however, they also want to know the best way to memorize grammar points and vocabulary for the exams that they take. Students’ entire lives are aimed at doing well on the educational system of exams because through these objective exams their futures are based. Though I would love my students to learn vocabulary and grammar through conversational practice, I know that my students want some kind of special formula or rule to help them logically understand the English language. I must balance fluency-based activities and the communicative approach with accuracy-based activities and the grammar translation approach.

The last couple of semesters I’ve been more strict—less tolerant of students being late, not standing to answer a question, sleeping, or goofing off in class. I realized that that’s normal behavior for their Vietnamese teachers and the students aren’t going to have a problem with me doing it too. Since I teach “informal” classes that don’t have grades, marks, or strict attendance policies, I think it’s helped some of the students take the class a little more seriously. I think [the students] appreciate and respect a teacher who’s stricter than I had been at the beginning.

Before I use a different technique, I explain it to students. After each technique, I have them assess what they learned and how well they learned it. I might do this through quizzes or discussions.

As can be seen, these changes mainly involved lecturing more, explaining grammar, following textbooks more closely, being stricter, and explaining new methods and techniques.

Overall Discussion of the Research

Project Challenges

A weakness of this project was its limited data triangulation. This was primarily due to the time restraints of the project and the difficulty of collecting data in a timely fashion. Greater collaboration with and input from experienced Vietnamese teachers would have greatly increased the scope and depth of insight of the
Despite their willingness to help, many of these teachers carried full teaching loads at the university and taught in additional evening programs. This, coupled with the distance many of them lived from campus, presented formidable scheduling challenges. To avoid this problem, future research involving teachers might profit by including time from the teachers' summer holiday into the research schedule.

Another difficulty was that the processing of data, particularly the data collected in Vietnamese, was often dependent on outside help and required a great deal of waiting on my part. By the time the data was finally processed, it was too late in the semester to implement many changes in classroom policy without being unfair to students. Thus, the actual implementation of and reflection on actions suggested within the research had to be postponed.

**Project Benefits**

A distinct benefit of this project was the opportunity for professional dialogue it created between Vietnamese teachers and myself. Interaction with these teachers strengthened existing relationships and deepened my appreciation and respect for the social values and professional expertise my Vietnamese colleagues bring to the classroom. It also reinforced my position as a learner—a student of my students and of their culture.

Another reward of this research was the interaction with other foreign teachers via e-mail. Because we are geographically dispersed throughout the country, we do not often have the opportunity to discuss specific classroom issues and strategies we have encountered or applied. This project allowed me to learn from the experiences of others who are facing similar issues.

**Conclusions**

Several areas of inquiry in this research have had an immediate effect upon my development as an educator in Vietnam. First, this research has encouraged my pursuit of knowledge and expertise in the subject areas I teach. Also, it has prompted me to begin to explore specific aspects of my own teaching. Next semester, I plan to conscientiously show sympathy to my students by becoming more aware of social and family situations that have helped to shape their identities in the classroom. I plan to do this by interacting more intentionally with the Head Teacher responsible for disseminating relevant student background information. I would also like to explore the way Vietnamese teachers use advice to express sympathy.

A practical concern which will shape my future teaching is that of strictness in the classroom. I hope to begin acting upon my new awareness of this topic as I begin the next semester. I would particularly like to develop new procedures for assigning, checking, and grading homework on a more regular basis. As I develop these procedures, I expect to actively evaluate student responses to these changes. Because the subjects I teach—pronunciation and listening—are not writing-based, I had not considered giving a great deal of homework. I had certainly not considered checking 120 students’ pronunciation every week! However, one of my Vietnamese colleagues suggested that I assign weekly word lists and call on several students each week to pronounce words from these lists. I would like to experiment with her suggestions by designing a system for grading students, holding them more accountable for their practice in pronunciation throughout the semester, and analyzing the impact of this system on student performance and motivation.

Overall, this experience has offered me a unique balance of fresh discovery tempered with collaborative experience in stretching beyond the confines of traditional research. It has enabled me to better understand my students and respond more appropriately to their needs. This action research project has led me on a journey that has enriched my knowledge and broadened my awareness of the cultural values within the educational community I serve. Additionally, it has allowed me to begin to probe some of the underlying perceptions upon which these values are based. Consequently, my commitment to adaptation has been solidified, allowing me to envision my own role as a teacher within new and dynamic dimensions.

*Students may wrongly equate “fun” with “easy” or think that because they are enjoying themselves they are not learning.*
References


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What types of things do people often carry on their motorbikes? Discuss with a partner.

Where do you think the driver is taking the octopus? In a group, brainstorm at least five possible destinations and explain why you think so.

What is the strangest item you’ve ever seen on the back of a motorbike? Write a short paragraph describing the situation.