This article reflects on the nature of language learning and teaching. By describing his own learning of two foreign languages, the author complicates the issue of teaching a foreign language, showing the importance of context, learners’ motivation, and learning styles.

Becoming an EFL teacher has made me often reflect upon several of my own more memorable language teachers—some taught so well that I would choose their model of teaching in my classroom, and others used methods I strictly avoid. However, from my experience, it seems strange that I learned more with teachers who applied “old” or traditional methods of teaching, rather than with those who incorporated totally new methods in the classroom. What follows are my contrasting experiences in learning English and French, the former with a traditional teacher, and the latter with a “modern” teacher. My different results in learning these two languages will suggest some implications for teaching.

Traditional Learning of English

When I began to learn English at secondary school in Vietnam many years ago, my teachers all modeled the idea that learning a foreign language meant learning the grammar and vocabulary of that language. Mr. Quang was my first teacher of English. His teaching methodology and techniques greatly influenced my following years of language study. Every morning when Mr. Quang entered the classroom, we had to stand up and greet him in English. Then we began to recite our previous grammar lesson in chorus. We had to say “nonsense phrases” such as “I am,” “you are,” “he is,” and so on. Then he would point at someone in the class and that student had to produce the next line. If someone failed to produce the correct form, the teacher shouted “Wrong!” and asked him or her to sit down and listen to the other students.

Grammar explanations were presented in formulas. For example, the present continuous tense was described as “I be + verb + ing.” Memorization of these formulas was the main part of our learning. In addition, we had to memorize the rules of each usage. We tried to learn by heart in Vietnamese many sentences such as, “The present continuous tense is used to refer to an action that happened in the past.”

There were also weekly written tests for us to do. The most popular model of question on tests in those days was, “Put the words in the brackets in the following sentences into the correct forms.” So we had to find a way to write the correct forms of words in sentences such as, “Yesterday, John [go] to the market” or “Peter enjoys [sing].”

Strangely enough, despite the boredom and hardship of the English lessons, I liked them, and even liked the teacher. At that time I believed that the only way to study English was through this method. Perhaps because of my knowledge of grammar (helped by the year of French I had taken in middle school before starting to study English), or perhaps because of my intrinsic motivation, I was Mr. Quang’s most beloved student. I always scored perfectly on the grammar tests and felt proud to produce the correct past and past participle forms of irregular verbs when I was called on in class. I did not know how to learn English in any other way. For me, knowing more grammar rules and memorizing more vocabulary were all I should aim to achieve in my class. I believed that with vocabulary and grammar I could read more books in English, and that I would not be able to speak until the time when I had mastered all the grammar rules and had “enough” vocabulary.

My family tradition of learning foreign languages was a good motivation for me. I made a serious attempt to achieve a good knowledge of English in the same way as my father had done in French. I admired his scholarly knowledge of French, though I rarely heard him speak the language. I was also struck by the story of my uncle, a Communist in the struggle against the French. While imprisoned by them for political reasons,
he spent most of his time trying to memorize thousands of words from his French-Vietnamese dictionary.

I felt proud to be pushed by Mr. Quang to strive to do better and better. He was constantly encouraging me to go beyond my present level in order to make me try a bit harder. Therefore, despite the stressful hours in class, which may have scared many of my peers, I enjoyed learning English in this way. Looking back now at those days with the eyes of a modern language teacher, however, I am saddened by the realization that many students were probably discouraged or inhibited in their language learning as a result of Mr. Quang yelling "Wrong!" at them.

I continued to receive instruction in grammar more or less in this way throughout secondary school and college. I was content with my progress in grammar. However, as my knowledge of grammar became more and more developed, I longed for someone to communicate with in English.

The opportunity came when Vietnam began to open its doors to the outside world. When I tried to speak English to American and British tourists whom I happened to meet on the street, however, I realized that—despite my perfect knowledge of English grammar, which worked wonderfully for reading and writing—I spoke with great difficulty. Although I knew the rules very well, I simply could not make it come out easily and most of the time forgot the rules when I was trying to speak. I had a constant underlying fear of making mistakes, which was very discouraging. Speaking was a definite challenge for me. But later on, when I overcame my fear of speaking and became more used to it, I realized that the grammar instruction I had received in school had played an important part in developing my proficiency. So I still had reasons to thank Mr. Quang.

Modern Learning of French

The way I learned French in college was not at all similar to the way I had learned English. The result of many years spent learning this language was also different.

My French teacher, Madame Thuy, did exactly what a communicative language teaching instructor should do in class. I could say that in some ways she was the best language teacher I had ever had. Madame Thuy never explained explicitly the grammar points in class. Instead, she always tried to teach grammar in a living, context-embedded way. She always used the target language in class and tried to make us communicate in French as much as we could.

I was terrified of her, though she never humiliated students by yelling "Wrong!" or "Sit down!" like Mr. Quang. I remember well the first time Mme. Thuy came to my class speaking French to us. It was our third semester of French in college, and for me, my third year overall of learning French, yet when she spoke it to us I experienced feelings of fear, discomfort, and distress that I shall never forget. I never looked up, for fear that she would pay attention to me. When she moved closer to me, I was dying and hoping she would move on to the next person. When I was called on, I just muttered something like French and prayed that she would not question me more. There were oral and written tests that I did very well on, thanks to my careful preparation. But Mme. Thuy never knew that her lesson was my nightmare, because for me conjugating verbs was a hundred times easier than speaking. Mme. Thuy would be disappointed to know that despite her great effort to make us speak French in class, I could never utter a single sentence in French whenever I encountered French-speaking tourists.

Recalling Mme. Thuy's methods, I can imagine the situation of Vietnamese students, who, with a learning style and expectations similar to mine, are put into English classes with a new and modern teacher such as Mme. Thuy. These students would experience frustration and fear caused by the new roles of the teacher and learners, by the new methods used, by the new learning atmosphere, and by the new goals or targets for learning.

Implications for Teaching

My experience in language learning has convinced me that the best possible teaching methods are those that consider many complicated issues, such as the context of teaching, learners' motivation, learning styles, and cultural habits.

Nowadays, the need to communicate in English with people from many countries in business and education requires Vietnamese learners to have a working command of English rather than a merely academic knowledge of the language. Therefore, the traditional grammar-translation method is certainly out of date. However, it would be misleading to get rid of all parts of the traditional grammar-translation method. Since Vietnamese language learners often come to class with an expectation that teachers will explain the vocabulary and bits and pieces of grammar rules and style points, they would be disappointed and confused if teachers
ignored all these things in a lesson. One student learning English in Hue with an instructor who was applying a totally new teaching approach commented: “I don’t understand why the teacher doesn’t teach us grammar. I just want to learn more grammar. How can I write and speak without learning the grammar rules? The teacher just ignores grammar and always wants us to speak.”

As a result, grammar analysis, structure explanation, and limited use of translation must be essential lesson plan components in teaching Vietnamese learners, especially beginners and adult learners. But the way grammar is taught can be different from the traditional method. Instead of deductively explaining grammar rules, then asking students to do drills and exercises in the textbook, teachers can relate language points, sentence structures, and grammar drilling to the meaningful use of language in the students’ own lives. For example, an instructor teaching the past tense in context could tell what he or she did last weekend, then ask students to do the same. The focus should be on meaning rather than on form. In this way, teachers can help students to realize that the ultimate purpose of learning English is to be able to communicate in English, rather than to master all the rules and vocabulary for their own sake.

When incorporating a new teaching method, teachers should adapt it to the specific contexts of Vietnam. New methodologies such as communicative language teaching (CLT) often meet with failure in Vietnamese classrooms when they are rigidly or formulaically applied. Due to time constraints and other limitations, many short-term workshops funded by NGOs and development agencies in Vietnam fail to introduce Vietnamese teachers to a complete or adequate knowledge of CLT. For many Vietnamese teachers in such training programs, “CLT” simply means making and even forcing students use the target language whenever possible in the classroom. CLT is viewed as a unitary, indivisible methodology that must be applied in a “pure” manner.

Due to this misleading belief, a majority of trainees report that CLT or the techniques of CLT learned at workshops cannot be applied in Vietnam because of different teaching contexts and students’ different learning styles. From this, they conclude that it is impossible to apply any ideas from the new methodology. Unfortunately, the concept of adapting whatever aspect of a methodology is appropriate to them, or of pragmatically using whatever works, is seldom considered.

According to Kramsch and Sullivan, the principles of CLT in Hanoi might be the same as those in London, but in real classroom practice, what is appropriate and effective in Hanoi is different from what is appropriate and effective in London. The application of CLT should be seen as a multicultural, multilingual exchange of pedagogy, rather than as a “transfer of pedagogical know-how” (p. 201). Instead of strictly adhering to the processes of applying CLT, as learned in some methodology workshop, Vietnamese teachers should attempt to analyze which aspects of CLT will work for them and their students, and research and develop which communicative activities will fit their students and their contexts.

It is also important for teachers to be aware that students will not communicate with their peers or with teachers if they do not feel a real need to do so. Many times, Vietnamese teachers attribute the failure of new methods to the stereotype, “Asian learners are shy and quiet by nature, so it is hard to spur to them to talk in class.” This might be true. However, teachers should also question whether or not the tasks they develop are

Resource Bulletin Board

Update Re: English Teaching Forum

As of October 1, 1999, the United States Information Service, publisher of the English Teaching Forum magazine, “was abolished and certain of its functions were transferred to the Department of State,” according to a posting on their Website. The new Internet address is: e.usia.gov/education/engteaching.

On this page, you can find links to other TESOL sites, online versions of English Teaching Forum articles (searchable, dating back to 1994), links to TESOL publishers, and an online journal called Language and Civil Society (updated weekly). As of this writing, you can still receive a complimentary subscription to the print magazine by contacting the American embassy in Hanoi (as per the notice in our October 1999 issue).
meaningful and relevant to students' lives and appropriate to their linguistic ability.

My lesson on the last Women's Day revealed that even the shyest and quietest students can be active in class, if given a real motivation to communicate with their peers. When I entered the classroom on that day, I noticed that all the female students had candy and flowers on their desks. One of the women told me happily in English that they had just received these small gifts from their male classmates. Another woman said jokingly that the men in their class were nice to the women once a year—only on Women's Day. Upon hearing this, some men started to defend themselves. It seemed everyone wanted to talk at the same time. I asked them to calm down, then made them sit in five groups, each consisting of both women and men. I asked each group to discuss and reach a consensus about things that Vietnamese women are not free to do in society which men are able to do. The noise level rose as people began working actively. To my amazement, many women who had usually been shy and quiet in class were actively involved in the group discussions. After the discussion, the secretary of each group wrote a list of the things they had agreed upon on the blackboard. The noise continued as people expressed their agreements and disagreements about the lists. With my help—giving vocabulary and structures relating to the issue of gender—a class discussion followed. The class talked about many issues, ranging from Vietnamese women's values, to sharing housework in the family, to lists of "Do's and "Don't's for Hue women. Everyone was involved in sharing experiences and exchanging ideas. We had a great time on that day, and I believe that the students in our class learned a great deal, not only in terms of language skills, but also in terms of life experience—all through their meaningful communication in English.

It is also my feeling that some Vietnamese teachers are overly concerned with students' and colleagues' expectations, and worried about a loss of control and a loss of respect if they attempt to make alterations to what they are doing. The loss of control relates to the classroom environment, while the loss of respect relates both to classroom situations and to their standing amongst their colleagues. Classroom teachers often hesitate to try new ideas for fear of being laughed at or even ostracized (Brogan). For these reasons, adopting a Western learner-centered method, which might lead to a change in teacher-learner relationships and affect teacher's power, would be considered risky in Vietnam. To avoid this, teachers must seek a compromise to their power. Rather than being a dominant authority, teachers can make use of their respected position in the classroom to facilitate the learning process by giving support, advice, and guidance when necessary to various communicative tasks. Teachers need not fear a loss of prestige, because they are still an indispensable language resource for their students.

Conclusion

Since Vietnam certainly needs more people with a good working command of English to further its integration into the world, traditional English language teaching is undoubtedly no longer useful. For practical reasons, modern teaching methods should be introduced into the educational system. However, modern teaching methods should be applied with a close and careful consideration of the cultural values of Vietnam. It would be advisable for teachers to strike a balance between the traditional extreme of Mr. Quang and the modern extreme of Mme. Thuy. To ensure effectiveness in teaching, new methodology should be adapted into traditional learning contexts. Since education is deeply rooted in specific philosophies of teaching and learning, teachers cannot develop an appropriate methodology until they reflect on it in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which they are working.

References


Pham Hoa Hiep (M.A., Bilingual/ESL Studies, University of Massachusetts-Boston) is the Head of the Division of Culture and Literature in the Faculty of English at Hue University. During the past two years, he worked as a teacher trainer in the Teacher In-Service Education Program, Vietnam-Australia Training (VAT) Project funded by AusAid in Hanoi. He has also written articles for *Easy English, Vietnam News*, and *The Gioi Moi*."

Teacher's Edition — 23 — March 2000