Vietnamese TESOL teachers' cognitions and practices: Developing learner-centred teaching

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Introduction

- Teacher cognitions

- Teacher cognition as a research area

- Traditional way of teaching and learning in Vietnam vs. call for a shift to a teaching approach that is learner-centred and capable of promoting learner autonomy (e.g. Vietnam's *Strategies for the Development of Education 2011-2020* and *National Foreign Languages 2020 Project*)
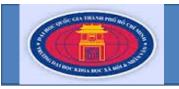
The study

- Single site case study

- Questionnaires to staff
- Interviews with staff
- Classroom observations

- Constant comparative analysis

Findings

- Use of a learner-centred approach: by 83% of the teachers (30 out of 36)

- Teacher cognitions: informed by background variables (e.g., age, learning experience, personal preferences, professional knowledge)

- Teacher cognitions and teacher classroom practice: complex and at times, inconsistent relationship

Learner-centredness - Teacher cognitions and practices

1. Centrality of student needs

- Teacher beliefs: student needs should be taken into consideration in educational decision-making

- Practices that match these beliefs: responding to student-perceived needs

- Practices that don't match: responding to teacher-perceived needs

→ degree of fit between beliefs and practices: not high

Learner-centredness - Teacher cognitions and practices

2. Acknowledging and accommodating student characteristics

- Teacher beliefs:

  - need to cater for student characteristics;

  - need to show respect and appreciation for diversity among learners;

  - like student needs, student characteristics: source of information for curriculum and course design

- Practices that match:

  - allowing students to learn what they were interested in;

  - responding to differences in students' proficiency levels and personality characteristics

- Practices that don't match:

  - guided by their knowledge, experience and preference;

  - focusing mainly on students' interests and levels;

  - not paying much attention to learning styles and student beliefs

→ degree of fit: not high

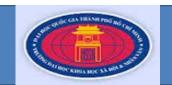# Learner-centredness - Teacher cognitions and practices

3. Development of student autonomy

- Teacher beliefs:

  - importance of developing student autonomy, particularly active and participatory role of student in learning process;

  - need to encourage student involvement in classroom;

  - opportunity for students to make choices and to have their voices heard;

  - teacher as facilitator or guide

- Practices that match:

  - peer assessment;

  - student selection of learning topics, activities and materials;

  - encouraging students to start lesson themselves;

  - use of pair, group and project work;

  - scaffolding practices

- Incongruence between beliefs and practices:

  - absence of strategies for learner involvement and learner training;

→ degree of fit: not perfect

Learner-centredness - Teacher cognitions and practices

4. Interpersonal relationships in classroom

- Teacher-student relationships

    - Teacher beliefs:

        non-authoritative role for teachers;
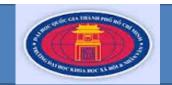
        rapport between teacher and students

    - Practices that match:

        peer assessment;

        student selection of topics, activities and materials

- Practices that don't match:

    setting strict time limits;

    not responding to student-perceived needs;

    not allowing for student choice;

- Also, some practices congruent with teacher beliefs about *effective teaching*, rather than about *learner-centred teaching*
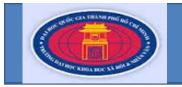
→ degree of fit: not strong

- **Student-student relationships**

  - Teacher beliefs:

    supportive relationships among students:

    students help and learn from each other

  - Practices that match:

    use of pair, small group and project work;

    peer assessment

→ degree of fit: very high

Learner-centredness - Teacher cognitions and practices

5. Principled pragmatism

- Pedagogical approach followed by teachers: characterised by 'principled pragmatism'

  Teachers' practices: selected in principled ways;

  informed by psychological and contextual factors teachers subject to, i.e. teaching philosophies and teaching context

- Teachers' teaching philosophies:

  - cognitions/beliefs about language teaching and learning and about learner-centredness in particular

  - developed from professional knowledge, teaching experience, previous learning experience and personal experience and preferences

  - reflecting teachers' individuality

- Teachers' teaching context:

    - constraints:

        prescribed syllabus: time pressure and lack of information about student-perceived needs

    - freedom for teachers:

        teaching methodologies and use of English as instruction medium: not dictated;

        teachers' right to supplement set textbooks and to write test papers for mid-term tests

    - influence on teachers' practice or action:

        facilitating and inhibiting teachers' adoption of learner-centred approach

- Alignment and inconsistencies between teachers' cognitions and practices: illustrative of

    - ethic of practicality (Hargreaves, 1994)

    - 'a sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1990)

    - 'principled pragmatism' (Kumaravedivelu, 1994)

    - pedagogy of practicality (Kumaravedivelu, 2001, 2006)

    - 'mediating role' of the individuality of the teacher (Bell, 2007)

Conclusion

- Impracticality of adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' teaching method

- Understanding of teachers' cognitions and their teaching context: essential to thorough understanding of their overall pedagogical approach and specific teaching practices

Thank you for your attention

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