

Sociolinguistic Aspects on Contemporary English Language Teaching and Learning at Tertiary Levels in Vietnam



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ABSTRACT: Language is considered as the object of sociolinguistic researchers in the correlation of social aspects. Therefore, the relationship with age, gender, ethnic varieties etc. is analyzed. During the era of integration, globalization impulses Vietnamese to communicate with the rest of the world. Accordingly, English is taught in Vietnam based on the curriculum of Ministry of Education (MOE) in general and at tertiary institutions in specific. By reviewing and analyzing preceding articles, the author would discuss the impacts of social aspects on teaching and learning English in higher schools in Vietnam besides instructors' teaching quality in terms of English competence and pedagogical one.

KEYWORDS: sociolinguistics, tertiary, TESOL

INTRODUCTION

According to Fromkin et al. (2003), we live in a world of languages. In greater detail, language is considered one of the most powerful tools for human communication including expression of ideas and attitudes as well as exchange of information and feelings (Meyerhoff, 2006; Marginson & Dang, 2017; Vo, 2021). Indeed, Lawton (1968) mentioned that learning and utilizing languages, which is "a guide to social reality", support science to solve society's problems. Therefore, from the view of sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) as cited in VanPattern & William, (2014) the systematic cognitive tool of communication helps society to change. In fact, with the support of expressing ideas, information as well as emotions among individuals in any societies, science, technology, economy, education and medicine develops. Along with the development of science in terms of natural and social fields, it is seen that languages have changed. In addition, Meyerhoff (2006) opined that sociolinguistics concentrates on how people use language differently in different regions, which means cultural and social factors contribute to language use and on the contrary, language affects society. This statement is line with the work of Chambers (2007) as this author indicated that "Sociolinguistics is the systematic study of the social uses of language". In general, language is an attribute or property of human society, hence, it is regulated and influenced by human civilization; conversely, language could as well shape the world in which human being is living. In general, sociolinguistics, like other branches of linguistics, has been ubiquitously applied without awareness due to the fact that this science considers languages as a phenomenon of society. These researchers have desire to focus on different issues of the correlation of language with social aspects and factors; and they utilize distinct methods in order to collect the data so that they could unveil the big picture behind. Meyerhoff (2006) advocated that sociolinguistics, whether with qualitative or quantitative approach, focuses on language varieties, social correlates, sociolinguistics and related fields. Additionally, Rajend Mesthrie (as cited in Conrad & LeVelle, 2008) indicated that sociolinguistics concerns how language is used in context and researchers try to figure out the correlation of speakers' intention with social background, characteristics and identities within the certain context of communication. The author, in detail, described the variations including dialect, style, change and practice. From the previous researchers' view, the sociolinguistics focuses on the relationship between language and social factors, which is in line with the conclusion of Hudson 1990 (as cited in Aronoff & Rees-miller, 2007). In another move, Neves (2020) reached a conclusion that linguistics branch also considers the related fields especially the pedagogical activity of teaching and learning in which communication occurs frequently. In this paper, the writer provides the current circumstances of teaching and learning English at tertiary levels in Vietnam. Furthermore, discussion of sociolinguistics and related fields of language teaching and impacts of

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“sociolinguistics aspects” including age, gender, code mixing and code switching for effective pedagogical activities at tertiary level will be shed a light on. The concern for more effective learning and teaching English not only in pandemic but also in the future is also raised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current situation of teaching and learning English at tertiary level in Vietnam

Before covid-19 pandemic: general view

English is believed to have appeared in Vietnam before 1954 (Hoang, 2010), yet the observation of dramatic increase in teaching and learning English is showed in nearly forty years after 1986 according to Wright (2002 as cited in Ton & Pham, 2010). Although before 1975, this language was commonly used in the South of this country due to the fact that Vietnam war had led to the separation of two regions within a country (Ton & Pham, 2010; Hoang, 2010) as this region was under control of the United States of America. The development of English in Vietnam is considered in four phases including the first stage before 1954; the second one was from 1954 to 1975, the third period was between 1975 and 1986 as well as the current situation since 1986 up to now according to Hoang (2010). In detail, this researcher also indicated that English teaching and studying in Vietnam before 1954 was unclear as English was utilized by an unclear number of people without statistical evidence. Then in phase of 1954 and 1975, whilst Russian and Chinese were instructed officially as foreign languages in the North of Vietnam, French and English were taught in the South. The union in 1975 remarked the dominance of Russian and Chinese over English together with French until 1986. Since then, coming along with integration and globalization era, English has been a powerful tool as there are the needs for communicating with other nations in the world for goods exchanging. Now this language is being taught in curriculum as a compulsory subject for K12 system of MOE. In addition, educational institutions at higher levels also require students to achieve English proficiency for graduation. Additionally, the scholar mentioned the concerns of general register (GR) or academic register (AR) as well as GR and AR in terms of teaching English at tertiary levels, which is a heatedly argumentative topic. These arguments occur due to the fact that theories, approaches and methods for teaching have changed over the world, the language, furthermore, changes under the perspective of researchers. The changes have been mentioned through 4 stages of learning and teaching English in Vietnam.

Online learning during covid-19 pandemic

The development of the world could be better now if the pandemic of covid-19 had not taken place. Having been found in Wuhan late 2019, pandemic of covid-19 has spread all over the world dramatically and drastically. The consequences of being injected have been mentioned fatal because of the high death rate. It could be viewed that the disease has globally affected people in many fields. In fact, economy, health and education could be listed firstly. In order to prevent the spread of the infection, the regulations of social distance have been applied in several nations, which means people have to stay at home and wait for the control of covid-19. Simultaneously, vaccination has been conducted as the alternative solution of staying at home. When learners study at home, the explosion of applications for virtual framework happens. Being in line with the circumstances of the world, Vietnamese students share the situation of online learning. Müller et al. (2021) invokes that higher education has become lifeline as E-learning method is the first and last choice for all. Indeed, some applications supporting both instructors and learners for studying online have been proved effective (Tran, 2021). Furthermore, students in Vietnam had the satisfaction of the computer-based approaches of learning according to Dinh and Nguyen (2020). In detail, computer-based in general or computer assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning in specific also raise positive awareness of learners (Le, 2021). From all the mentioned perspectives, studying English at tertiary levels is supported by computer-based as well as mobile device-based approach.

Roles of social aspects and impacts on English teaching and learning at higher education in Vietnam

Although the setting of the classroom experiences a shift from face-to-face convention to online learning, communication, materials, approaches and other aspects of learning as well teaching keep unchanged. Therefore, social aspects such as age, genders, code mixing and code switching remain the same as they are the constant or nearly constant variations of class room setting. These factors would be made clear in terms of roles and impacts on effective English teaching and learning.

Age

Clearly, from the view of Noam Chomsky (1965 as cited in Parisse, 2005), age is considered a significant factor that influences learning process based on the notion of “crucial period”. In addition, VanPattern and Williams (2014) invoked the language

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acquisition device (LAD) of Chomsky about the best ages for learning as well as acquiring new languages. This means, the older the students are, the harder they learn. On the contrary, Paiwithayasiritham (2013 as cited in Vu & Shah, 2016) stated that age and gender do not affect learners as well as instructors' attitudes and behaviors in learning and teaching activities. In fact, Peeraer & Van Petegem (2011) conducted a study in order to explore the information and communications technology integration (ICT) in Vietnam. The questionnaires were responded by 783 participants of five Vietnamese teacher education institutions. The authors had a desire to figure out the factors affecting the integration of ICT among teachers as well as students in Vietnam. In detail, the study focused on the ability to access ICT and related skills for utilizing technology in teaching and learning. The analysis revealed that age, gender and teaching subject influence ICT integration as young teachers are more familiar with technology than the older ones. This research findings was in line with Lee (1998)'s study that old instructors face barriers of CALL application in teaching. Nonetheless, literature of Peeraer and Van Petegem also indicated that when explained by ICT skills and teaching subjects, these variances had no significant influence in practice. This means the older generation instructors could enhance skills and confidence in utilizing computers in pedagogy.

From the current perspective, when ICT or CALL is the necessary choice of MOE, this phenomenon is considered a heated topic. Combining with the view of Chomsky (1978), the fact that aged lecturers have to update the knowledge and skills of CALL or ICTs for their teaching career takes time. Moreover, it is explained in the Innateness Hypothesis view that learning environment has a big impact on the process of absorbing new knowledge and information. When computer-based approach is considered the last choice of educational progress, enhancing the capabilities of computer skills and ICTs is compulsory and it could be done if the users have intention. The early theories in second language acquisition, moreover, shed a light on the willingness of learning new things. In the Affective Filter Hypothesis (VanPattern & Williams, 2014), when learners intend to study, they will make efforts to overcome obstacles. However, age is still viewed as one of the factors affecting the quality of instructing English at higher institutions in Vietnam although in previous studies, it remains partly unclear. This raises the questions for further study to take an in-depth research for providing spotlight the big picture behind this social factor and the correlation with pedagogical process.

Gender

In terms of gender, Nguyen et al. (2021) stated that language acquisition is varied in terms of genders as well as regions and religions. In detail, Nguyen and colleagues investigated which factors could have impacts on learning process of Vietnamese students. They concentrated on five characteristics of learners including "learning purpose, learning ability, learning method, hard-working, and self-awareness" (Nguyen et al., 2021). In addition, "demographic factors, parental indicators, and schooling-environment" were also put on the list of their model that impact on the English output of students. The data was collected from 8 famous universities of Vietnam which consisted of 2500 questionnaire samples. Whilst the methods of studying were indicated the top concern on the list of "intrinsic factors", females' acquisition appeared quite low in compared with male, hence the English competence of men are higher than women. This interesting result showed that gender differences affect the quality of learning English at tertiary levels in Vietnam.

Moreover, to be in line with the influence of gender to English pedagogical activities at universities in Vietnam, Maheshwari (2021) advocated that intrinsic factors comprising of "perceived ease of use and self-efficacy" were affected by gender. This study was implemented in order to figure out the factors which have impact on the learners' intention in phase of studying online during the pandemic of covid-19. The number of participants was 145 and they had to make reply to Structural Equation Model (SEM). One more finding is also related to the notion of age influence on language learning which has been mentioned above that "the learning intentions were being affected by age and the educational level". In short, gender is considered one of the social factors affecting language learning process in general and English teaching and learning in specific at higher levels in Vietnam.

Briefly, from the view of previous research, gender notion influences the learning process whether this is explicit or implicit. Accordingly, the combination of sociolinguistics and other sciences such as psycholinguistics, perhaps, take the phenomenon to an end in light.

Ethnic varieties

In addition to age influence on English instruction at universities in Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2021) also provided spot light on the concern of ethnic varieties at academic institutions. It is stated that English proficiency of the minor ethnics was not as good as major ones. This could be explained apparently due to the demographic conditions. Do & Do (2014) wrote that the minority

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communities have received varied policies to develop remote and mountainous areas. Additionally, language difference also creates low proficient English at universities since, although after the union, Kinh' s (Viet) language was chosen as the national language, the minorities still utilize their mother tongues at home or in their communities. Therefore, the dominant language of the minorities appears to be complicated. All things considered, the low proficient English of minorities in higher education in Vietnam implies that varieties of ethnics might affect the language teaching and learning. This phenomenon straightens out the picture of language teaching and learning in MOE due to the fact that students have studied foreign languages in primary, secondary and high schools. The heritage of preceding learning in remote or mountainous areas affects higher education generally and English instructing specifically. Therefore, the ideas of languages policy- one of the issues of sociolinguistics are figured to have more attention. Drawbacks in terms of geography could have impact on the demographic patterns in education leading to the lower quality of system. From the view of instructors and sociolinguists, different methods (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001) should have been applied for the equity of learners.

Because of many reasons in terms of geography as well as demography, ethnic varieties are stated to be one of the social aspects that influence the outcome of learners at academic institutions. With the findings of low proficiency in English of ethnic minorities, there appears the implication of problems. Firstly, from the view of MOE and government, there are still obstacles in teaching and learning English in remote areas in minor ethnics which lead to low quality. In addition, with the different competence, teaching and learning process in higher education will take students time and efforts to keep up with peers from majorities. Therefore, some possible solutions should be concerned. Secondly, in terms of schools and teachers, relevant policies should be adopted. Beside different teaching methods for specific learners, schools should set regulations for the equity and equality in pedagogical process. Last but not least, classroom integration among students from the view of sociolinguistics which offers the view of collaborative working under perspective of Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978 as cited in Lantolf et al., 2014) could decipher the problems of lower outcome.

Code mixing and Code switching

Kieu (2010) raised a concern about utilizing mother tongue in instructing English at universities in Vietnam due to the fact that there have been outlook focusing on the target language. However, according to Vygotsky (1978 as cited in VanPattern & Williams, 2014) that knowledge could be acquired in the process of transfer from inter-person to intra-person. This occurs based on the interaction of the participants which is supported by the scaffolding strategies including using first language (L1) in teaching and learning second language (L2). This research implies that the appropriate combination of using mother tongue and target language support the process of teaching and learning. As the strategies of scaffolding are mentioned, the utilization of mother tongue in explaining or guiding students from instructors could be counted effective; therefore, learners could be able to access the information easily. The communication including CS provides students and lecturers with opportunities to engage in classroom activities easier. Via the communication with scaffolding in form of CS, information is transferred from the act of language exchange from inter-person to intra-person. Accordingly, students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) expands. The phenomenon of utilizing parallel languages in forms of words, phrases or even sentences is considered code-mixing and code-switching. This is in line with the definition of code mixing and code switching, which will be discussed following.

In terms of code switching (CS), Grant & Nguyen (2017) agreed with theory of Simon (2001 as cited in Grant & Nguyen, 2017) that CS is the teachers' choice of making utterances in L1 or L2. The scholars desired to explore the awareness of utilizing CS in classroom setting of Vietnamese universities. The data was collected from the classroom observation, record, file notes as well as teachers' interviews. 12 participants taking part in the study were lecturers from a university. By analyzing the data, the authors figured that without awareness of CS, the instructors make entries in giving guide for the students. In context of limited time, this is a way for lecturers to encourage learners to join the class. In addition, CS also offers students to share identity which is in line with the hypothesis named Affective Filter of Krashen (as cited in VanPattern & Williams, 2014). In fact, this hypothesis indicated that the willingness or motivation of students could be influenced by the encouragement of teachers. The instructors should consider the use of CS. All mentioned issues imply that utilizing mother tongue should be considered by lecturers and teaching foreign languages focuses on L2. Accordingly, CS should be used with moderation which will effectively enhance the pedagogical activities. In regard to CS, however, in daily communication, Nguyen (2012) explores its use between Vietnamese and English for shedding a light on the reasons and the methods. Although this research was carried out overseas, it shares the setting that the participants are

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bilingual, and the instructors as well as learners are at a certain level of MOE. The findings show that CS appears when there are some words with no equivalence or hard to translate in a foreign language. This is an easily visible cause not only in daily life but also in academic setting as it is clear that there are some language items that cannot be translated. Therefore, this dilemma leads to the CS. The author referred that CS is a method for transferring the information without equivalence in comparison with languages. Nonetheless, the demand of transferring information in equivalent terms concerns researchers as the comparison of languages for certain purposes with new perspective in contrastive linguistics requires people to determine certain context for better communication. In terms of pedagogy, CS plays an important role under the circumstance of no equivalence in translation and the implication for further research in translation.

Conversely, code mixing (CM) is agreed to be one of the most effective ways of learning languages by using L1 or L2 according to Celik (2003 as cited in Le, 2006). This study was conducted by analyzing the video records in a classroom of an English bachelor program at a university. The findings revealed that working in groups under the method of making utterances in L1 provides students opportunities to express their ideas. Accordingly, the interaction among students was observed positively, which confirmed the SCT and interaction theory that ZPD development leading to better quality in learning. In addition, from the perspective of interactionists, collaborative working in classrooms regulates the behaviors of students. In fact, group work could save time for students and raise positive filter for learners. Accordingly, students are willing to share and contribute their ideas with their teammates.

Both CS and CM make language teaching and learning effectively in general and English instructions in specific at tertiary levels in Viet Nam. In phase of studying online, from the view of interactionists, the disadvantages of communicative activities far outweigh the advantages. This occurs due to the fact that in virtual classrooms the speaking activities are carried out alternatively. This means the speakers take turns in expressing ideas, which entirely differs from conventional classroom. Moreover, the oral activities of pairs and groups are limited due to the fact that some online applications of meeting do not offer breakout functions for discussions. Low Internet connection and limitation in hardware also mark the failure of communicative methods in teaching. Therefore, the instructors should be more thoughtful in CS and CM application in order to encourage students to engage in class according to Krashen and Vygotsky (as cited in Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Inoue & Bell, 2011; VanPattern & Williams, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In short, this paper concentrates on social aspects which affect the process of teaching and learning English at higher education level in Vietnam. In detail, the spotlight is provided into the factors of age, gender, ethnic as well as code-mixing and code-switching. In detail, age notion could be viewed as an obstacle of ICTs with the teachers and this problem requires enhancement from instructors as well as training from the institution. Moreover, gender and ethnic varieties are as well figured the cause of lower outcome of learners, which offers the implication of regulations and policies for solving the problems. Meanwhile, the use of mother tongue in form of CS and CM with appropriate utilization should be encouraged with effective teaching strategies. The writer investigates these aspects of society for making clear the relationship and correlation between these items in language learning and teaching at higher levels in Vietnam. By utilizing second language acquisition as well as sociolinguistics, the author discusses the roles and impacts of the mentioned factors.

Moreover, some recommendations to overcome the obstacles of English learning and teaching universities in Vietnam are given. For instructors, training on social aspects should be provided so that lecturers have an overview of the big picture behind the communication. Therefore, they could have regulations for high teaching quality. Students should be offered sociolinguistic courses in order to study more effectively.

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