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The Transformation of Position and Teaching Practices of Foreign-trained Vietnamese EFL Teachers

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Introduction

Since Doi Moi (Renovation), the Vietnamese education system has witnessed an increasing demand regarding the locals' English language proficiency in an attempt to respond well to the requirements of socio-economic development in the country. This demand accelerates high-quality English language teaching and learning in association with the issuance of education policies and developmental plans to heighten the language proficiency of English language academics and teaching practitioners for desired teaching performances. To illustrate, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2008) issued the National Language Project 2020 and sponsorship programs to send Vietnamese academics and practitioners overseas for postgraduate studies. Besides, sponsorships from foreign governments (e.g., Australia and the U.S.) are a favourable option. In pursuing international postgraduate programs in developed countries or internationally collaborative programs based in Vietnam, advancing English language proficiency is one of the primarily required milestones (Ton & Pham, 2010). They are expectedly immersed in a wealthy English speaking environment, grappling with authentic language use.

Although there has been a substantial body of research on Vietnamese academics participating in their degree programs overseas, there is an imbalance as it is relatively limited in our understanding of their engagement in their communities upon their return to their home communities. This issue is significant as Vietnamese academics, especially EFL teachers, return to their home countries and institutions upon completion of their degree programs overseas. The return then requires a re-adaptation and possibly a transformation in their perspectives and practices. This study is part of a larger project that investigates the re-adaptation of EFL teachers in higher education in Vietnam after their postgraduate programs overseas. The entire project explores the (mis)alignments in the perspectives of EFL teachers during pre-, while-, and post- TESOL postgraduate programs towards their expectations of what they will learn, what they have learned, and how they can contribute to improving teaching and learning qualities at their institutions in Vietnam. This study specifically contributes to the understanding of Vietnamese academics' transformation of their positionings in their degree programs overseas and how the transformation of positioning results in the transformation of their teaching practices in their home institutions.



Literature Review

Following the opportunities for overseas programs for Vietnamese academics, it has been well-established in the literature that these academics considered their ‘non-native’ English language proficiency as the primary barrier for their participation in their programs and contexts in English-speaking countries. Consequently, they are inferiorly (self)-positioned. However, there has been a movement against such essentialist view of ‘non-native’ speakers as incompetent and inferiorly positioned. The notion of World Englishes has raised the status of other English varieties given the increase and dominance of speakers of English as their additional language. In addition, the view of legitimate peripheral participation (Sung, 2019) also contributes to the rising position of those newcomers who are commonly seen to lack the cultural capital or symbolic powers (e.g., native-like English proficiency). Sung (2019) recognizes the fruitful commitment and participation of these newcomers through interaction with the more experienced in their communities. Through these interactions, the newcomers acquire the capital and are able to enter their academic communities.

It is commonly believed that Vietnamese graduates from overseas programs, especially in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), should possess native-like English language competence and this seems to be a big concern. However, regardless of the contexts of their post-graduate programs, they seem to be largely overwhelmed by the native-speakerism necessitating native-like proficiency and accents (Nguyen, 2017). Obviously, those new graduates in possession of that advantageous capital (e.g., cultural, linguistic) can be grouped into “competent” and “powerful” (Ayling, 2019; Bourdieu, 1991). Otherwise, those without those funds of capital are threatened to be socially excluded (Brown, 1995) and, alternatively, called ‘nobody’ (Kettle, 2005). Therefore, the fact that Standard English is more appreciated as an exhaustive property of native speakers is likely to create a hierarchical gap between English-language speakers (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Strauss, 2017) despite the absence of measures to identify Standard English (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Underlying the belief of overestimated native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), this paper uncovers how two Vietnamese EFL teachers addressed their perspectives of native-speakerism through the transformation of their positioning as non-native speakers of English during their engagement in postgraduate TESOL programs overseas. The study also unpacks how the transformed positioning affected their later teaching practices upon return. To explore the transformation of positioning, this study draws on the concept of reflexive positioning or self-positioning through discursive practices of conversations and interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019) and Kettle’s (2005) perspective on agentive transformation from ‘nobody’ to ‘somebody’ to explore how the teachers were influenced by the discursive practices in their sociocultural contexts and actively engaged in re-positioning and aligning themselves with the communities. From Kettle’s (2005) study, an international student in Australia initially disengaged from academic activities due to his inferior self-positioning. However, through his ongoing engagement with the community, he perceived himself as a more legitimate member for being able to participate in the community activities and to be recognised or audible (Kettle, 2005; Miller, 1999). Such transformation of positioning and perspective could be thought of as an advancement in one’s cultural capital (Ayling, 2019; Bourdieu, 1991, 1997). As this study concerns EFL teachers who experience transformed positioning overseas, what needs further research is the influences of this transformation on academic practices, especially, the extent to which such transformation in positioning and an advancement of cultural capital changes their teaching practices upon return. Specifically, we are interested in the teachers’ practices in resisting their initial reflexive positioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Towards a large-scale project to explore Vietnamese EFL academics’ overseas experiences and ways to locally adapt in their local settings after graduation, this report addresses two questions:

- How did the Vietnamese EFL teachers’ transformation of positioning as non-native English speakers occur during their training programs overseas?
- How did that transformed positioning affect their teaching practices upon return?

Methodology

This report draws on the data from a larger project in Vietnam that explores the experiences of Vietnamese TESOL teachers during their academic programs in different English-speaking countries and their experiences at home institutions in Vietnam upon return. The project aims to point out the achievements and challenges of these teachers in the programs and their engagement with the communities overseas as well as the process of (re)adaptation to their home teaching contexts.

This case study employed purposeful sampling to select participants pertaining to the aims of the study. For this study, Daniel and Tyler (pseudonyms) were included as a result of our determination of their extensive academic experiences overseas (e.g., short exchange program and postgraduate course). Daniel gained his bachelor's degree in ELT in Vietnam and further master's degrees in TESOL in Australia before commencing his full-time lectureship at a Vietnamese university. He understood that a postgraduate degree granted by an institution based in an English-speaking country would provide him with TESOL professional prospects, privileges, and respect in terms of his developments of disciplinary, linguistic, and cultural capital (Le & Phan, 2013; Nguyen, 2017; Ton & Pham, 2010). At the time of the research, Daniel had taught English to college students for more than three years. Differently but coincidentally, Tyler is very different regarding his initial exposure to higher education in the major of Economics. He spent several years teaching English to young learners in a private center during his college life. However, his international and intercultural experiences have set him apart in how he appeared to distinguish between good and effective teachers. From his expressions, he considered good teachers as some passive followers of established guidelines for their teaching and other related responsibilities, but the effective teachers refer to those who are willing to follow the established guidelines in an innovative sense. These effective teachers mean that, firstly, they are competent at carefully examining what they need to teach, before they can enact their culturally responsive teaching, so that their pedagogies would likely respond well to their students' cultural backgrounds, academic qualifications, and personal needs. Keeping this in mind, before pursuing the second master's degree of TESOL, he chose to enact his use of textbooks with no reference to examining how effective textbooks are for his groups of students. Therefore, considering his students in several culturally diverse communities of practice (CoP) really matters to his decisions in teaching. He also argued that CoP aims to bring educational inclusion and equality into the teachers' and students' attention because the classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, culturally, linguistically, and ethnically. Therefore, he agreed that there are "no-better-Englisches" in his pedagogical decisions and his ways of classroom structures.

This study employed semi-structured interviews with the participants to gain their insights into both their experiences during their overseas TESOL programs and their later teaching practices. Specifically, the interviews focused on how the teachers positioned themselves during their engagement in the academic programs, the possible transformation of positioning, and how these changes in position influenced their teaching practices. For a more comprehensive understanding of innovations in their teaching practices, their teaching journals were collected and segments that were related to changes would be highlighted for further interviews.

Findings and Discussion

From the journals and interviews, Daniel and Tyler were found to start with inferior self-positioning due to being non-native speakers of English, which then was transformed while continuously seeking to enhance their teaching practices.

The Transformation of Position

Both teachers shared their inferior sense of self-positioning due to their lack of symbolic capital in their target English-dominant contexts (Bourdieu, 1991) to prove their fluency to be more similar to that of native speakers. This low self-positioning prevented them from enthusiastically participating, from raising their voices, and from being recognized as “somebody” in their target academic communities (Kettle, 2005).

My non-native English accent and uncommon repertoires in language use challenged my racial status as a non-native English speaker in the communities with a dominance of English native speakers and restricted my participation in discussions with others. (Tyler)

I thought that for those attending a postgraduate program in an English-speaking country, everyone expects them to have very high English proficiency, which I did not think I had. This was one of the long-lasting struggles that I kept thinking of as I am not sure people would understand me. (Daniel)

As a postgraduate student, Daniel unavoidably interacted with his lecturers and peers, for the sake of teamwork with disciplinary peers and his widening networks with professional and/or social communities. However, his non-native English accent, despite a high level of proficiency, affected his belief of reaching effective communication with other people, which caused his low reflexive positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019) and was found very common in international students (Nguyen, 2017).

However, Daniel’s later more active participation in academic activities potentially helped him exercise re-positioning where he resisted the initial inferior positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019) to become ‘somebody’ as an agentive subject in his community with interactive others (Kettle, 2005) and to be audible to others in the community (Miller, 1999). Furthermore, his decision on active engagement with not only several academic but also community-based activities (e.g., local community-service campaigns) could reduce his fear of being marginalised as a non-native speaker of English, as well as acknowledge his linguistic and cultural capital (Phan, 2009; Strauss, 2017) at the expense of his so-called ‘social exclusion’ due to his limitation of native-like proficiency and accent (Bourdieu, 1991, 1997; Brown, 1995).

I could see how other international students and myself were heard and respected in the conversations despite our various English accents. I then wonder if native-like fluency and proficiency would be a prerequisite to be recognised here. I had to say No to this question and started to comfortably join the activities hosted by the university and local social organisations. (Daniel)

Meanwhile, Tyler fortunately was in close contact with his English-native speaking advisor and with local residents. These forms of engagement allowed him to raise his confidence to have his voice heard and his contributions recognised. Parallel to what Daniel experienced as previously indicated, Tyler also made use of residents of his local communities because they were engaging and meaningful to help him exercise his use of English language very uniquely. For example, he had chances to consistently construct his sense of being and becoming, based on his critical awareness of where he is geographically situated and how he is culturally influenced. From our data, his insights into how he perceived himself linguistically were a result of his life-changing experiences which were bounded by his sociocultural contexts.

The way he saw it, he enjoyed conversing with his community leaders and neighbours, as Americans of colour who offered him to experience some types of African American English (AAE). Because this AAE is not considered Standard English, his vignette, reporting on his knowledge about “*non-Standard English because they used the pop-music languages to communicate*”, shows that he became a full member in the

so-called “games” of English language use in the US contexts (Bourdieu, 1997). Interestingly, he pointed out the false categorization of Standard English and non-Standard English was true, with special attention to who should be considered native and non-native speakers. Grounded on how he defined them, he referred to “identity” which is dynamically changing and negotiated through discourse (Varghese et al., 2005; Varghese et al., 2016). This, certainly, is worth being referred to Bourdieu’s stances on *capital* and *habitus*, we would interestingly draw on Tyler’s continuous efforts on making his teaching and sense of teacher learning more subtle and meaningful.

If his daily experiences paved a path to his realization of Standard and non-Standard English, beyond his initial thoughts on native and non-native English speakers, his academic experiences resulted from his participation in academic communities were astonishing. Reporting on his regular reflections, he showed his enthusiasm in not only yielding his self-achievements regarding both his better understanding of how English should be perceived academically, but also his recognition of importance placed on collaboration between him and his colleagues regardless of where they come from and what certain types of English they use. Rather than questioning when his academic supervisor sometimes made some grammatical mistakes, he solidified his beliefs on the roles of English with its diverse forms and shapes in terms of what its users can benefit from and how, more importantly, its users can strengthen their sense of communities where any English is used (Canagarajah, 1999). Obviously, consistent with his observation of daily experiences within his African American communities, if he clearly noted essential qualities of English varieties, he determined those equally privileged as long as each can enable its users to gain communicative successes.

I was not under-positioned in this English-only context by English-native speakers, which changed my existing belief of native-speakerism when all linguistic and cultural backgrounds are fully advocated in this English-dominant environment. (Tyler)

To wrap up, attending various intercultural experiences was significant for teachers to grow their professional identities and sense of belonging to the discourse communities where they were allocated (Botelho de Magalhães et al., 2019).

The Transformation of Teaching Practices

Upon return, when Daniel stepped up to challenge native-speakerism perspective in his workplace, he realized the students’ ongoing criticism and non-preference over Vietnamese EFL teachers due to their non-native English accents regardless of their professional backgrounds. Raising the values of non-native English speakers was his privilege because he tried to utilize his linguistic capital towards his acquisition of legitimate membership of the target communities (Bourdieu, 1997). In terms of Daniel’s experiences, his transformation of teaching practices was highlighted through his role of a curriculum designer, such as promoting the use of non-native-English-speaker videos on TED-talks for his Speaking classes. Considering exposing his students to the varieties of English, he wished to shape his learners’ perspectives on who should be the property holders of English, either those in Inner-Circle, Outer-Circle, or Expanding-Circle countries. Also, he suggested his students’ exploration of how to consider the public speeches successful, from which he was more competent to contribute to his learners’ (non-)academic experiences.

I would like to see how those non-native English speakers would be recognised by my students. None of them obtain the predominant British or American accents which my students tend to praise. I want to see how much the accent contributes to someone’s credibility. (Daniel)

As also advocating the importance of inclusion in English language teaching and learning, in addition to sharing his professional endeavours towards closing gaps dichotomizing English language speakers

into non-native and native users, Tyler has established his long-term educational goals of considering, developing, and sustaining his classrooms as communities of practice (CoP). According to him, these communities were put forward to foster his sense of confidence via visualizing teacher identities as well as to facilitate his students' self-growth and pursuit of collaborative culture of learning. Embodied in Tyler's lived experiences in teaching and his essence of teacher learning, it can be drawn on from Bourdieu's (1997) attention which is placed on a perfect example of how a CoP could be incorporated for academic success and, more broadly, students' learning satisfaction among their students' populations.

In another spectrum of the world of Englishes, Tyler was committed to promoting his classrooms as culturally diverse communities as an Asian educator (Gardinier, 2012; Tsui, 2006). Substantial changes were made to his ways of teaching in that his interests in developing his students' academic knowledge and effective use of English based on their actual needs were inspirational for him to take a critical stance on what and how to teach, in light of considering his students in several culturally diverse CoPs. Despite initial challenges of addressing his students being more favourable to strictly following Standard English, he attempted to make his communities more engaging, by encouraging his students to discover the English language through authentic materials which were not designed for teaching purposes. He claimed:

I don't seem to necessarily force the students to follow what I want, but they don't. Rather, I engage my students into our communities of practice where respect is fully given, and differences are recognized. I have my full understanding of why my students favoured Standard Englishes more than other types of English for some reasons, but I made efforts to incorporate the comprehensive language inputs to the curriculum. (Tyler)

In their journal records, they both agreed that clarity of content, speakers' knowledge of the topics, and importantly an *understandable* English proficiency should be given more importance. In Daniel's views, these aspects serve as evidence of his initial transformation to impact on his students' thoughts on the non-native English speakers when it comes to the more importance placed on understandable English, rather than that purely produced by native-like speakers. Meanwhile, Tyler put forward recommendations on how the varieties of English ought to be experienced for the sake of learners' full understanding of the English language.

In light of the popularity of English not only belonging to those in the inner-circle countries (Kachru, 1985), the linguistic capital is essential in EFL teaching and learning. Therefore, it seems useful to consider the varieties related to the English language and uses and respect those holders to include them in the legitimate communities (Bourdieu, 1997; Le & Phan, 2013) as "somebody" in their discourse communities (Kettle, 2005).

Implications and Conclusion

This paper is an effort to eliminate native-speakerism ideologies and reinforce the positioning of non-native English teachers. The experiences of the Vietnamese EFL teachers illuminated the transformation of their positioning as inferior to well-recognized non-native speakers within the discourse communities in English-speaking countries (Davies & Harré, 1990; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Kettle, 2005; Strauss, 2017). It is essential to argue for the values and acknowledgement of English language varieties, enhance the teachers' self-esteem, and engagement in their discourse communities with little exposure to the cultures of native-like proficiency and accents. While having native-like proficiency and accents may have some merit (Bourdieu, 1991), acknowledging many English varieties and enclosed values of non-native EFL teachers can ultimately contribute to developing their teaching performance and professional development (Le & Phan, 2013). The study offers an innovative perspective of EFL teachers whose English is an additional language and their (re)positioning for success and confidence in their teaching. It is necessary for these teachers to recognise the long-lasting contested native-speakerism that proposes hierarchical positions among speakers of English language.

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