

INVESTIGATING EFL TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEORIES OF LANGUAGE AND PEDAGOGY: A CASE STUDY AT THE FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE OF A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

This case study aims to investigate EFL teachers' knowledge about theories of language and their awareness of pedagogy in relation to teaching English as a foreign language in the context of one faculty in a private university in Vietnam. The study employed a qualitative method. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The data were transcribed, language translated and imported into NVivo 12 Plus software for coding and analysis. Results of the study show that EFL teachers' pedagogical knowledge requires a degree of flexibility and the ability to adapt in terms of practices. However, they do not pay much attention to theories. The study provides some suggestions for further professional development for EFL teachers and future researchers.

Keywords: *EFL teachers; Theories of language; Pedagogical knowledge; Higher education.*

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, English language teaching at the higher educational level is divided into two categories: English language as a discipline, and as a compulsory subject. In the first category, English as a discipline, students are studying a Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, or Doctoral Degree in English, with a view to becoming teachers, translators, interpreters, and/or researchers in English linguistics or English language teaching methodology (Van Van, 2018). In the second category, English is taught as a compulsory subject across the whole higher education system in Vietnam. In this category, undergraduate students often study English for about 10% of their total credit hours (Van Van, 2018). The credit hours for a Master's or Doctoral degree program are about 12 percent,

slightly higher than the 10 percent of the undergraduate programs.

The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) of Vietnam understands the important role that English plays in the global integration and modernization of the country's economy. It also realizes the shortcomings that exist in relation to the current teaching and learning of English in the whole educational system. This recognition has led to their proposal of a *National Foreign Languages 2020 Project*, now extended to 2025. Its intention is to enhance English language teaching and learning at all educational levels in Vietnam. This project is aimed at preparing Vietnamese graduates from vocational schools, colleges, and universities to be able to use a foreign language (especially English) competently for daily communication,

to study and to work in an integrated multicultural and multilingual environment, initially by 2020 (MoET, 2008b); however, realizing the unrealistic targeted outcomes of the project, MoET (2017) issued another decision to tailor the goals of the project to be achieved by 2025. MoET requires university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to achieve level 6, the highest level of the test called *Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency* (VSTEP). To achieve these targets, MoET is encouraging Higher Education Institutions to transform their English language teaching methods and curricula (MoET, 2017). The extent of EFL teachers' knowledge of language theories and pedagogy, however, is still unknown and requires further research.

Research Questions

To achieve the aim of this study, the following research questions will be used.

- To what extent do teachers at the faculty of foreign language of a private university understand language theories?

- To what extent are teachers at the faculty of a private university aware of pedagogical knowledge? And how is it evidenced in their teaching practices?

2. Literature review

Traditionally, EFL teachers are required to have substantive knowledge of language theories, as well as of pedagogy. These two types of knowledge constitute the foundation or key requirements for EFL teachers to become professionals. The following sections review key theories of language, and pedagogical knowledge needed for EFL teachers.

2.1. Theories of language

Becoming a qualified teacher of any language requires foundational knowledge of both the content and the theories that inform the *what* and *how* of language teaching (Valadenz, 2010) since theories provide the necessary background and scaffolding. Theories of language are classified as structural, cognitive, functional, communicative, and interactional. Table 1 provides a brief overview of language theories.

Table 1. Overview of theories of language (adapted from Valadenz, 2010)

Theories of language	Definition
Structural	Language is equated with its linguistic forms
Cognitive	Language is a biologically predetermined mental ability
Functional/ communicative	Language learning is a tool that is used to accomplished things or certain purposes like communication
Interactional	Language is a means through which exchanges, performances, and human relationships are created and maintained

A brief chronological review of each theory is presented in the following paragraphs.

Structural theory

Structural theory of language considers language as being composed of interrelated linguistic features, such as phonological, lexical, and syntactical elements (Lavadenz, 2011). It informs a teaching approach that focuses on learning the discrete elements of language: the sound system, such as consonant and vowel sounds; vocabulary, words and their meanings; grammar and structures, such as tenses, types of sentences, phrases, and clauses.

Cognitive theory

Cognitive theory shifted focus from the structure of the language to what was happening inside the learner. According to cognitive language theorists such as Chomsky (1975), language is a biologically pre-determined mental ability - which is why this perspective was also called the “mentalist” approach (Lavadenz, 2011, p.20). Cognitive theory explains humans as being born with the innate ability to create and use language via a series of cognitive processes, assisted by what theorists conceptualised as a ‘*Language Acquisition Device*’ (LAD): an element of cognitive activity that allows the brain to process input and develop the capability to ‘output’, or to produce

language (Krashen, 1982). According to McNeil (1967), this conceptualised LAD includes four cognitive-linguistic components:

- The ability to distinguish speech sounds from other sounds in the environment
- The ability to organize linguistic events into various categories that can be refined
- The ability to recognize that only certain types of linguistic structures are possible and others are not; and
- The ability to evaluate language production to determine the accuracy of production.

These cognitive components were combined to build a new theory of language learning, known as ‘*Universal Grammar*’ (UG). According to the concept of universal grammar, all languages have the same underlying principles, but differ from each other in terms of various elements, including rules for sentence structure, pronunciation, and word insertion. Awareness of these features of languages led to the belief that language teaching methods should involve the application of innate rules of grammar via the explicit generation and analysis of new language structures (Lavadenz, 2011).

Functional or communicative theory

The next chronological stage of theorising language acquisition and learning was the advent of functional or communicative language theory, which viewed language as essentially happening to ‘get things done’, to function and communicate in the world; as the medium which helps to achieve specific purposes or make specific meanings. A number of functional language theorists, such as Halliday (1970), Wilkens (1976), and Widdowson (1978), argued that communication is the essential characteristic of language; a position characterised as the “point of intersection between functional and communicative language theories” (Lavadenz, 2011, p.21), which in turn had implications for language teaching and learning theories. Functional and communicative theories focused primarily on the meaningful use of language, and the 1970s saw a major shift towards communicative language teaching. The impact of this shift is still apparent in current language

teaching methods and Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been one of the best known and well-established approaches to language teaching and learning (Alamri, 2018).

Interactional theory

Another important theoretical development was interactional language theory, which conceives of language as the means to develop and maintain relationships, to interact and transact socially, to send and receive communicative messages. The relationship between theory and practice has always meant that approaches to teaching have changed and developed alongside theoretical developments.

2.2. Pedagogical Knowledge

Shulman (1976) defined pedagogical knowledge (PK) as referring to the whole teaching process, to *how to teach*. It includes knowledge of (i) lesson planning and reflection upon the implementation of strategies such as establishing class rules, grouping students, setting up class routines, using techniques and strategies to enhance learning environments; (ii) differentiated instruction and rigor, (iii) classroom management, (iv) assessment and feedback (Mohamed, 2012; Cherner & Smith, 2016). The following paragraphs review further about pedagogical knowledge.

Lesson planning and reflection play a vital role in developing and designing meaningful learning experiences for students (Akyuz, Dixon, & Stephan, 2013). In order to design an effective lesson plan for future teaching, it is important to consider previous lessons taught (Ylonen & Norwich, 2012).

Differentiated instruction refers to the way teachers engage all students in a lesson by providing them with choices, options and hooks that engage their personal interests and suit their ability levels (Tomlinson, 2014). Rigor refers to teachers’ acute awareness when engaging in the learning process and their ability to use tools to measure the rigor of learning tasks that require higher order thinking skills.

Classroom management is also crucial. When teachers design lessons, they must have a well-managed classroom to make the lessons

effective (Kunter, Baumert, & Köller, 2007). Teaching has less impact in unorganized classrooms where students are not focused, compared to those in which students are focused on instruction.

Feedback and assessment are also core elements of effective teacher knowledge. Feedback is very important; and there are a number of aspects to comprehensive and effective assessment of students' learning. Teachers need effective assessment plans that prepare students for fair and effective assessment, and which allow them to administer, interpret, and communicate assessment results. (Cherner, & Smith, 2016).

In relation to this study, the PK of an EFL teacher should encompass the knowledge components discussed above.

3. Methodology

This case study employed a qualitative method. To answer the above research questions, ten semi-structured interviews with ten EFL teachers, who taught English as a foreign language at a private university in Vietnam, were conducted. Each interview lasted about 15 to 20 minutes in length. After interviewing, the raw data were transcribed and translated before being imported into NVivo software for coding from InT1 to InT10, visualising and analysing process.

4. Summary of results

The EFL teachers' responses to questions language theories and pedagogy were coded in the theme *EFL teachers' theories of language and pedagogy*. All initial codes for this theme were collapsed into six categories: (i) knowledge about language theories, (ii) lesson planning and reflection, (iii) differentiated instruction, (iv) classroom management, (v) feedback and assessment, and (vi) literacy skills. Typical responses to questions in each category are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Teachers' knowledge about theories of language and pedagogy

Categories	Typical responses
Knowledge about theories of language	I am not interested in those kinds of theories (InT5)
Lesson planning and reflection	I just list main points of each teaching lesson, and I often reflect what went well after teaching (InT3)
Differentiated instruction	It is true that depending on each subject and learners to have different teaching styles (InT2).
Classroom management	Usually in classroom, I organize and manage students quite similarly, I often let my students work in groups (InT4)
Feedback and assessment	I often provide feedback for my students and assess them based on criteria such as attendance, periodical tests and final tests (InT5)

The following paragraphs discuss in more detail what the participants indicated for each category.

Knowledge about theories of language: When asked about their knowledge of theories of language, the majority of the teachers replied that they did not know much about these theories. They did not see the link between theories and pedagogy, or they were not interested in learning about these theories. A small number of them acknowledged that their theoretical knowledge was very limited: InT10, for example, said that she had “just a little bit”; and InT1 mentioned that she had “a little knowledge about theory of language learning; that is, the approach to help students learn more effectively. My knowledge in this area is not much”. Other interviewees expressed disinterest or said that they had not heard about language theories. InT5, for example, said that she was not interested in ‘those kinds of theories’ [theories of language], while InT3 confessed that “the

theories of language, I have not learned and have not imagined what it is like”. These commentaries are concerning, indicating as they do that these teachers may be lacking in theoretical knowledge, which in turn may affect their ability to integrate activities with pedagogical knowledge.

Lesson planning and reflection: During the interviews, participants were asked whether they prepared lesson plans before teaching or not, and if they reflected what went well and what needed to improve in a teaching lesson. Their responses indicated that most of them did not prepare lesson plans before teaching. They explained that they got a lot of teaching experiences, so making lesson plans is unnecessary and time consuming. In addition, they explained that the textbooks had clear sequence and instruction. Thus, what they needed to do was to follow task by task indicated in the teaching lesson. Only one interviewee, coded InT3 listed main points before teaching as she said “I just list main points of each teaching lesson, and I often reflect what went well after teaching” (InT3).

Differentiated instruction: Most of the teachers said that they could change methods and styles of teaching depending on the subjects or skills that they were teaching and on their students’ levels of English competency. InT3, for example, commented that “It is true that depending on each subject and learners’ ability it is important to have a different teaching style”. She further explained: “when teaching adults, I need to treat them as more mature students. My words and explanations are also at another level. However, for teaching young students, I will be more active so that they can see the classroom atmosphere as fun, and they will be happier and more excited”. InT10 explained that she needed to understand students’ qualifications to change her teaching approach: “I need to understand students’ qualifications to change the ways I teach, whether it is suitable for them or not. I need changes to help students to improve the skills they need”.

Feedback and Assessment: The teachers reported evaluating students’ learning outcomes

based on a variety of criteria, such as their class attendance and their test scores. InT5, for example, explained in the following terms: “I evaluate students based on criteria such as firstly the students’ attendance, whether students regularly attend class or not. Secondly, students have to do regular exams and periodic tests”. Other teachers, such as InT10, also evaluate “based on students’ interaction, attitudes and efforts in class”. According to InT2, teachers evaluate students’ learning outcomes based on test results, such as the Mid-term test, the final test, or any quizzes or tests taken in class. Teachers also report evaluating students’ results through games and their performance in the classroom.

5. Discussion

Theories of language together with pedagogy constitute the foundational knowledge for any EFL teacher. Lavadenz (2011) emphasizes that good pedagogical knowledge is needed for teachers to provide learners with effective language learning experiences. As outlined in Shulman’s (1987) framework, EFL teachers’ pedagogical knowledge depends on knowledge of principles, teaching strategies and methods used to present content and to manage the classroom, and knowledge about educational contexts, learners and learning, and student assessment.

Findings in this study indicate that at the initial stage of the interviews most teachers found it difficult to talk about theories of language, second language acquisition/learning theory, or the strategies and methods that they use to teach. On further probing, however, it became clear that they do use many different teaching methods, such as grammar translation, task-based learning, and communicative language teaching approaches; and that they also adapt teaching methods and styles to meet their students’ needs. They were just not used to conceptualising or talking about these issues. This evidence suggests that the traditional teaching model at the research site sees pedagogy embedded in the content rather than being explicitly discussed or consciously

applied. This evidence suggests the need for support for teachers in relation to developing explicit knowledge, and providing opportunities for deeper probing, analysis and reflection in order for them to understand and operationalize the very different nature of the two types of knowledge.

As previously discussed in the literature review section, teaching is informed by structural, cognitive, Functional/communicative and Interactional theories (Lavadenz, 2011). After several further probing and more elaboration, the participants recognised that teaching and learning happen for particular reasons and in different ways through various activities and processes, such as drills and practice, repetition, and rewards; and that these activities reflect a behaviourist approach to pedagogy. Cognitivist theory, on the other hand, combining developmental cognitive learning theory and socio-constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1976; Bruner, 1996), works from the basic principle that learning takes place through social interactions.

Also, findings indicate that the EFL teachers in this study in effect draw upon a variety of teaching methods, including Audio-Lingualism, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBL), Grammar-Translation, and Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); that their teaching approaches are guided by theoretical principles developed for EFL teachers. The findings reflect the teaching methods used and the learning activities designed; and teachers at times are seen to change their teaching style to suit their students' needs; and to choose different sources of materials, for example from the internet.

Discussion presented in the literature review indicates that CLT is currently the most widely known and adopted approach to language teaching in the EFL context (e.g. Alamri, 2018). Alamri carried out a literature search which yielded 450 studies, of which he selected 7 for further review. Findings of this study indicated that while subscribing to the effectiveness of the CLT approach, EFL teachers in fact find it

difficult to implement, citing reasons such as being overburdened and underpaid, socio-cultural influences, and their comfort with traditional teaching methods. It was also clear that there is an issue with a lack of CLT training, problems in accessing CLT resources, low proficiency levels and a lack of motivation among students, the nature of existing examination systems, and the instruments currently used to assess the communicative competence of students (Asmari, 2015).

Findings from other studies have shown that EFL teachers continue to prefer the grammar translation method to the communicative approach to teaching grammar (Chang, 2011). Findings from this study similarly indicate that while the teachers do in part employ a CLT approach, they also draw on other familiar and traditional approaches, such as grammar translation. With the current support provided by the university the EFL teachers have no access problems in relation to CLT resources. The examination system, however, together with the instruments used to evaluate students' communicative competence, appears to affect the degree to which the CLT approach is being implemented.

Findings from this study indicate that most of the teachers did not prepare lesson plans which might affect the process of teaching and students' meaningful learning experiences. However, they might manage the classroom well, and they could evaluate their students' learning outcomes based on criteria set up by the faculty of foreign language. The findings suggest, therefore, a degree of flexibility and the ability to adapt. The above discussion highlights the important knowledge of theories about language and pedagogy in enabling EFL teachers to teach effectively and the challenges that currently exist within both their systems and their established practices. Deep understanding of theories about language and pedagogy is a prerequisite to enable EFL teachers to select and apply appropriate methods to effectively support teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

The quality of teaching and learning is mainly determined by the teachers' pedagogical knowledge, to how the content is communicated, and to what opportunities are provided for students to use English in an authentic environment to develop communicative competence. The study shows EFL teachers at the research site have a wide range of pedagogical knowledge in terms of practices. However, the EFL teachers do not pay much attention to theories which support what they teach. The EFL teachers focused on the 'step by step' element of procedural knowledge rather than on pedagogical conceptual knowledge. Professional development programs (if any) should therefore focus on how to strengthen

teachers' knowledge of language theories and pedagogical knowledge to make their teaching more effective and meaningful.

As explained in the above section, this study is limited in terms of participant numbers, having a small sample size of only ten EFL teachers in one faculty of one university. Further research on the same topic with larger sample sizes and from different universities will ensure more representative and more generalisable findings and will construct a more holistic picture of what and how EFL teachers teach. Further studies could also use other mixed methods to both interview and survey participants so that they may provide richer data.

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Tóm tắt:

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu kiến thức của giáo viên Ngoại ngữ về lý thuyết tiếng cũng như phương pháp sự phạm liên quan đến việc giảng dạy Ngoại ngữ trong bối cảnh của một khoa ngoại ngữ của một trường Đại học tư thực tại Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính. 10 cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc đã được thực hiện để thu thập dữ liệu. Dữ liệu được chuyển thể, dịch và nhập vào phần mềm NVivo 12 Plus để mã hóa và phân tích. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, về mặt phương pháp giảng dạy thực tiễn, giáo viên có mức độ linh hoạt và yêu cầu một khả năng thích ứng nhất định. Tuy nhiên, những giáo viên này không chú ý nhiều đến lý thuyết. Nghiên cứu cung cấp một số gợi ý để phát triển chuyên môn cho các giáo viên và một số gợi ý cho các nhà nghiên cứu trong tương lai.

Từ khóa: Giáo viên Ngoại ngữ; Lý thuyết tiếng; Kiến thức sự phạm; Giáo dục đại học.