Constraints on the Development of a Learner-centered Curriculum: A Case Study of EFL Teacher Education in Viet Nam

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Abstract
This paper aims to describe the findings of a study on the curriculum and tasks used at three EFL teacher education universities in Viet Nam. The findings show that the curriculum and teaching tasks are non-authentic, irrelevant and alien to the students because they are designed and developed without reference to the students’ needs, preferences and interests. The tasks are also non-interactive with inadequate teacher mediation and only occasional and unsatisfactory team or group work. In addition, the students’ voice and ownership in the learning process is not supported through task performance due to teachers’ dominant role in the teaching and learning process. Finally, because the tasks are product oriented, the knowledge construction process and metacognition in task performance are not adequately practiced, which results in the students not being trained to learn how to learn, how to construct and refine meaning, nor how to reflect on the structure of the task, and on the structuring of their approaches to the task. The paper ends with some implications for curriculum design and teaching material developments.

Introduction
Language education, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, has experienced significant changes over the last 30 years. One of the most radical changes in the field is the shift from a behavioral focus on second language teachers and the kinds of inputs they provide to a focus on learners and how learners process the input they receive. As a result, the learner is no longer viewed as a passive receiver of knowledge, but as an active participant and internal organizer of the target language (Schachter, 1998). The emerging recognition of the centrality of the language learner to the teaching and learning process has given rise to what is known as learner-centered language teaching.

In Vietnam, in line with the rapid socio-economic development in recent years, education has undergone major changes in terms of curriculum and learning materials as well as way of teaching and learning. In the new government proposals for educational development, a learner-centered way of teaching and learning is identified as central, and the involved learner is seen as a key component within it. However, learner-centeredness has not been successfully employed in EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam. This paper describes the constraints on the development of a learner-centered curriculum, teaching materials and assessment at three major universities of education in Vietnam.

Background
In Vietnam, EFL teachers for basic education are mainly trained at universities or colleges of education or of foreign languages. There are two different curricula for EFL teacher training courses, one for the three-year course and one for the four-year course. The generic curriculum frames for both courses are designed and mandated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), while the syllabus for each subject/unit is developed by each college/university. The curricula for both programs consist of 2 major blocks of knowledge: general/foundation knowledge and professional education.
The total required number of credit hours for the three-year program is from 170 to 180 (see, Ha, 2003, p.30). In this program, the general education component accounts for 41 credits (23% of the total program), and the professional education component includes 138 credits (77%), which are divided into three sub-components: pedagogical studies (21 credits), teaching methodology and practicum (17 credits), English language knowledge and skills (100 credits).

The total required number of credit hours for the four-year program is from 205 to 216. The sample program presented below is taken from the website of the Vietnam National University, Ha Noi. In this curriculum framework there are 214 credit hours which are grouped in 7 categories:

- General/Foundation knowledge (e.g., Ho Chi Minh's ideology, history of the Vietnam Communist Party, informatics, second foreign language, physical education) (57 credit hours, 26%).
- Mathematics and natural sciences (e.g. mathematics, geography) (5 credits, 2%),
- Fundamental knowledge of the discipline (e.g., introduction to linguistics, Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese language, research methodology) (17 compulsory credits, 8%);
- Basic knowledge of the discipline (93 compulsory credits and 4 optional credits, 45%). This category is divided into three sub-categories:
  - Linguistic knowledge (e.g., phonetics and phonology, semantics, stylistics, pragmatics) (12 credits: 10 compulsory and 2 optional)
  - Cultural knowledge (e.g., English and American literature, cross-culture analysis, English/American culture) (12 credits: 10 compulsory and 2 optional)
  - English language knowledge and skills (e.g., listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking, writing) (73 compulsory credits)
- Professional knowledge (e.g., psychology, pedagogy, educational management) (23 compulsory credits and 2 optional credits, 12%).
- Practicum (5 compulsory credits, 2%);
- Graduation thesis/graduation examination (10 compulsory credits, 5%).

Although the program is designed for university students who major in the English language, nearly 50% of the total credits are delivered in Vietnamese. These belong to the categories of general education, mathematics and natural sciences, fundamental knowledge of the discipline, and professional knowledge.

Teaching materials and course books are selected or developed in accordance with the syllabus guidelines/frames which are designed by different subject teams, e.g., listening skills team, speaking skills team, linguistics team, based on the master curriculum frame. In the main, these materials are adopted or adapted from overseas published textbooks, reference books, journals, videos, and from the media. Due to limited supply, the contents of most learning materials are out-of-date, inconsistent and particularly irrelevant to the students’ needs and interests. In some cases the knowledge and skills to be acquired are either missing
Learner-centered instruction

According to O’Sullivan (2004) learner-centered teaching is an elective antidote to the prevalence of teacher-centered didactic classroom practices, which support teacher dominance over passive learners and lead to rote learning and the stifling of critical and creative thinking. Learner-centered education aims to create favorable conditions for educational goals - access, equity, quality and democracy - to be accomplished (The National Institute for Educational Development [NIED] 2003). Changes in approach and methodology of teaching and learning have been affected by predominant factors which are summarized by Hoven (1999, p. 93) as the following: (1) a stronger focus on the learner as an individual; (2) a corresponding shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learners and learning; (3) consideration of differences in learning styles and learning strategies; and (4) various manifestations of humanism. As a result, the learner has been recognized as the centre of the teaching and learning process, and the recognition of the active role of the learner has given rise to a range of learner-centred approaches in teaching and learning.

While Wagner and McCombs (1995) believe that learner-centeredness merely aligns with the constructivist perspective, Pulist himself believes that learner-centered instruction draws heavily upon constructivism with the assumption that deep learning occurs when learners are actively engaged in the construction of knowledge for themselves (Pulist, 2005). In this approach teachers are expected to understand their learners’ views, beliefs and needs and to support capacities already existing in the learners to bring about desired learning outcomes (Schuh, 2003). McCombs (1997) argues that learning goals are realized by active collaboration between the teacher and learners who have a shared knowledge of what learning means and how it can be best promoted within each individual learner by drawing on the learner’s own unique talents, capacities and experiences.

Research methodology

Data generation and analysis for the study were based on basic principles of constructivism. Referring to the work by Cunningham and his colleagues (Cunningham, Duffy, & Knuth, 1993), Boyle (2000) summarized the five primary constructivist principles as task authenticity, interaction, voice and ownership in the learning process, knowledge construction process, and meta-cognition.

The approach adopted in the research was essentially qualitative. This paper is part of the study exploring the involvement of students in learning. The data came from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of data were questionnaires to students and to teacher educators, individual interviews with teacher educators and university leaders, student focus-groups, and case studies. The secondary data sources were documents gathered when visiting each site. These documents included curriculum guidelines, course books, and conference and seminar proceedings. The data generation took place in Vietnam, at three universities coded as Uni.A, Uni.B and Uni.C. These are institutions where students are trained to become upper secondary school EFL teachers. The three institutions represent different regions of Vietnam: the Centre, the North, and the South. At each university, the main participants were the teacher educators and the teacher students of the English Department.

Findings and discussions

The notion of task in this study encompasses the learning program as a whole, including assessment. The fact that the Vietnamese EFL students at the three universities are not
actively involved in learning is partly due to task limitations both in this broad sense and in the sense of classroom tasks. Here I discuss these limitations in the light of the basic principles of constructivism: task authenticity, interaction, voice and ownership in the learning process, knowledge construction process, and meta-cognition.

**Task authenticity**

The EFL students at the three universities claim that they are not very interested in doing learning tasks because of lack of authenticity. Authenticity in tasks and materials is a critical issue for practice (Struc, 2002). A learner aims to be able to read authentic materials and carry out authentic tasks in the real-world. Being able to perform authentic tasks as a learner is thus more relevant and motivating.

According to Cunningham (1991) learners must see the relevance of the knowledge and skill to their lives, and the leverage it provides in problems they see as important. However, in the case of EFL instruction in Vietnam in general, and at the three universities in particular, the EFL teaching and learning content is often disembedded from the learners’ experience outside the classroom. As a result, tasks often lack meaning for the students. Task authenticity is not adequately considered in the curriculum and learning materials because of various constraints.

One constraint is that the curriculum and learning materials are currently designed and developed without reference to students’ needs. While a truly learner-centered approach allows for the participation of learners in identifying their needs and establishing goals (Struc, 2002), this did not occur.

We have long been developing the materials for teaching. However, what we have done is merely a subjective prescription from the university, the department or the teachers. Therefore, we do not know for sure the extent to which the learning contents meet the needs of the students. In my opinion, our university, our department and we the teachers should think about this and immediately ask the students or create opportunities for our students to negotiate the curriculum outline, the contents, the teaching and learning approaches and the evaluation (AT3/170-176).

Another constraint on task authenticity is that there is a lack of learner data in the learning materials because most of the learning materials are adopted and/or adapted from foreign sources but not written by local writers or by the teachers. As a result, the students may feel that what they are learning is not practical and therefore useless.

Although the EFL department has so far developed more than twenty course books, many of them have not been ready for use. In addition, the teachers are now adopting information from different course books without any defined criteria; and even the teachers are not aware of the criteria. As a result, when the materials are bound to make what is called lecture manuals, repetitions, gaps and imbalances appear among lessons, which cannot be solved by the teachers. In sum, what is called EFL course books in our department are not at all standardized and the contents are alien and not useful (AH2/104-110).

In addition, the learning materials of some subjects are out-of-date and ill-structured. According to the informants, most of the learning materials contain out-of-date and irrelevant information which fails to attract the students’ attention and interest.

The information is both out-of-date and irrelevant. Therefore, we are not very pleased with our learning materials (BF3/71-73).

In my opinion, the books we are using now are very old. These books are about very old and uninteresting topics. It is desirable if a reading lesson is about a recent topic like the Internet so that we can learn about general knowledge through reading (AF1/322-324).

The monotonous formats of learning tasks and lessons together with the repetition of topics and themes among different subjects and at different proficiency levels also make the students bored and de-motivated in learning.
I think there should be a difference in each lesson. In order to help the students understand the lesson better, it is desirable if the structure of the lesson is based on the content intended for the students to master. In our case, because the format for the lessons from the beginning to the end of the book is the same, it is very difficult for us to be trained to explore the lessons in different ways (AF1/334-337).

Such curriculum without inclusion of students’ needs and preferences lack relevance and cannot motivate students to get actively involved in learning.

Interaction

In constructivist pedagogy, learning tasks serve as tools for social interaction which is viewed as the primary source for the cognitive constructions that people build to make sense of the world (Boyle 2000). Through interaction the students can negotiate meaning. This process enables the students to develop, test and refine their ideas. In carrying out a task, the students either interact with their teacher, “tutor-student relationships”, or with their peer, “peer group relationships” (Boyle 2000).

In teacher-student relationship, the teacher acts as a mediator providing the principles which the students acquire through structured social interactions. However, the teachers at the three universities were not adequately exercising their roles as mediators in helping the students to perform the learning tasks effectively.

I think our teachers need to give clear instructions. If they do not say anything about what and how we should do, and then they criticize us for some incorrect statements, we dare not speak for fear that we may make a fool of ourselves or may make ridiculous mistakes (AF1/202-204).

For example, in the speaking lessons, our teacher gave us the handouts and divided the class into groups to do the task. She neither gave us any instructions on how to do the task, nor supervised our work. Therefore, we were not at all inspired to do the task. We were sitting there playing games or talking in Vietnamese about things not related to the topic (CF1/118-120).

Referring to peer group relationships, Boyle suggests that students often learn best the processes of knowledge construction, negotiation and refinement in a community of peers. Therefore, in order to elicit multiple perspectives and encourage the negotiated construction of meaning, learning tasks must require students to work with their peers in pairs, groups or teams. Through group work, the central constructivist themes of authentic activity, collaborative learning, and appreciation of multiple perspectives are highlighted. In this study, although both the students and the teachers of the three universities appreciate working in groups and pairs as a means of interaction, in practice this way of learning is not consistently applied in all subjects, while tasks which require team work in the classroom and outside the classroom are almost nonexistent.

Some constraints on collaborative work were identified such as the classroom physical setting. One educator pointed out, “I want to let my students study in pairs or groups. However, because of the classroom setting I cannot ask my students to pair with the same partner day after day” (AT4/218-220). Time constraints and the nature of learning tasks were also thought to be unfavorable for this form of learning: “[i]n order to organize pair or group work I need about 20 minutes for each task. However, my lesson is only about 70 minutes long, and I often skip pair/group work” (CT5/69-71). Most students shared this view and added that pair and group work rarely happened and was confined only to speaking lessons:
Studying in groups is just at the beginning. It is only 0.5 point out of 10-point scale. If it reached 3 to 4 points, our English learning would be enhanced. In addition, working in groups only happens in speaking lessons but not in writing or other lessons. I myself and perhaps many of my classmates haven’t got a clear idea what it means by studying in groups. (AF2/294-299)

Lack of interaction between the teachers and the students and among the students themselves through task performance can be interpreted as one cause for students’ reticence in learning.

**Voice and ownership in the learning process**

In a learner-centered perspective, students’ voice and ownership in learning is promoted. Students are not only allowed but also encouraged to choose the problems they will work on. Instead of acting as the taskmaster, the teacher works as a consultant to help students to generate problems which are relevant and interesting to them. Learners’ input in task selection and development can reflect their learning preferences, their prior knowledge and experiences, and their learning styles.

This ideal was not realized in EFL instruction in the three universities. Far from allowing the students to have their voice and ownership in task choice and performance, the prescribed curriculum and learning materials, and the teachers’ dominant role in the learning process appear to impede the students’ initiative and creativeness. The data show that not many students feel comfortable to express themselves during the lesson and in discussions. Students’ opinions are not respected by their teachers.

I do not allow my students to get involved in selecting the topics. Because they do not have much knowledge about the subject matter, they are not able to get involved in selecting the topics. In addition, I must do this in favor of the majority but not of a few individuals (CT5/62-64).

Teachers are also so strict on severe complaints and criticism about students’ subjective ideas in writing and in speaking that they feel threatened and/or humiliated.

I think humanity is very important in education. Some friends of mine desired to share their understanding and subjective opinions with others. However, when they stood up to speak they might make some mistakes. Instead of understanding and sympathizing with their students, some teachers criticized the students in a severe manner. Consequently, these students lost their face in front of their friends and de-motivated. Later these students dared not say anything in public because their activeness has declined (CF2/167-173).

The students themselves are not confident enough to express themselves in public. Due to their poor language proficiency, limited knowledge of the subject matter, and narrow knowledge of the world many students tend to avoid raising their voice for fear of losing face. Thus, hiding their ignorance is the best policy. In addition, students’ misconception of teachers’ authority prevents them from expressing themselves. For many students, their teachers’ authority lies in their great knowledge and they argue that whatever the teachers say is correct. Most of Vietnamese EFL learners are not critical in thinking. They easily accept other people’s ideas, especially their teachers’ ideas and ideas from books without questioning.

Because our ideology is deeply rooted in the traditional way of teaching, most of us still think that in order to learn well you have to rely on your teachers and you must learn whatever your teachers teach. Teachers are believed to be super, therefore we must follow and there is no other way. (AF2/231-233)

Lack of their voice and ownership in the learning process in terms of task selection and performance indicates that the learning environment is not learner-centered and hence not democratic. This situation undoubtedly contributes to students’ low involvement in learning.
Experiencing the knowledge construction process is possible through authentic tasks and rich interaction (Boyle 2000). Traditionally, outcomes of the learning process would be defined in terms of the knowledge and skills the student has acquired. In a constructivist perspective, experiencing and becoming proficient in the process of constructing knowledge is more highly valued. In this sense, learning tasks should be designed in a way that the students, through task performance, can learn how to learn, how to construct and refine meaning.

Although both the teachers and the students of the three universities believe that students would be more actively involved in learning if they were involved in knowledge construction, there is not much evidence to show that this principle is observed by the curriculum designers, materials developers and EFL teachers at the three universities. Most of the learning tasks and assessments in these institutions are more product than process oriented. Therefore, while doing the tasks the students are not encouraged to pay due attention to the on-going process so that they can monitor or adjust their learning to meet the learning goals, leading to autonomy. Instead, the students are more concerned about the knowledge and skills they have to acquire and internalize.

I see that what we are tested in examination is based on what we have learned from the textbooks but not on our creative and critical thinking. For example, in addition to those questions which are aimed to check the students’ knowledge after a course of study, I wonder why there are not any questions which encourage students to express their views. Only when the students express themselves the teachers and the university authorities would understand the students, and the students would have opportunities to think about the issue. I think the students would be more active if they can express themselves through examination questions. Because you are forced to think, you need to have background knowledge. In order to have more background knowledge you need to read a lot. If education follows this sequence students’ learning would be more effective through examinations. In a word, examination is a motivating force for students’ learning (AF3/272-284).

The students never received any feedback from their teachers for their examination papers. When I asked one of the teachers if the students had ever been given any feedback on their papers, she said “never” and she explained:

After being marked the papers are locked in the cabinets and students’ marks are tabulated. When one semester finishes, another semester begins and other teachers will be in charge of the class. Moreover, the number of students in each class is so large that the teacher can hardly give feedback to each individual (AT4/195-198).

Also, self-assessment was neglected.

Researcher: Have you ever been helped by your teachers to do self-assessment?

Student 1: This concept seems strange to me. The assessment sounds not objective.

Student 2: Normally after a lesson finishes we move to another lesson, and things happen in that way.

Researcher: It means you have not been trained to assess yourself.

Student 1: No, we haven’t.

Student 2: We do assess ourselves in our own way but we haven’t been trained how to do it.

Student 3: I think in addition to training us in the skill to assess ourselves, the teacher should also help us to cross check among peers to promote learning. I think through cross checking a competitive spirit would be enhanced (BF2/377-387).

Although the current way of teaching and learning at the universities may satisfy those teachers and students who are product oriented, it fails to stimulate the students to activate
their learning ability to construct knowledge so that they can be true owners of their learning process.

**Meta-cognition**

Meta-cognition is defined as the higher order process of reflecting on our own thinking and problem solving processes (Boyle 2000), and also reflexivity (Cunningham 1991). When learning tasks are designed in a way that learners can learn through knowledge construction, they also pose problems for students to solve, and in solving problems, the students are involved in processes of reflecting on knowledge and its construction. Learning strategies play an important role in learners’ success in learning. Although learning strategies were appreciated by most educators and students in the data as inevitable tools for active learners, many educators complained that their students were not strategic learners and were studying without plans or strategies. Reflecting on their own experiences, most students admitted that they were not fully aware of effective learning methods or strategies.

I realise that methods of learning are very important. However, so far I have not found any appropriate methods for my studying. I’m not systematic in learning (CF1/185-186).

According to the participants, because learning strategies for particular language skills or academic subjects were randomly or unsystematically introduced, the students experienced difficulties in applying those strategies in their learning.

| Researcher: Have your teachers ever taught you learning strategies for each language skill? | Student 1: It depends on each teacher. Some teachers have but others haven’t. |
| Student 2: In general our teachers to some extent have referred to learning strategies in one lesson or another. However, for three years I have not been able to internalize those strategies, and I fail to use the strategies effectively (CF2/46-50) |

**Conclusion and implications**

While both the teachers and the institutional authorities expect their students to be active in learning task performance, the students themselves find it difficult to satisfy these expectations due to the nature of their learning programs, since most of the tasks and learning materials are prescribed in nature. They are non authentic, irrelevant and alien to the students because they are designed and developed without reference to the students’ needs, preferences and interests. The tasks are also non interactive with inadequate teacher mediation and only occasional and unsatisfactory team or group work. In addition, the students’ voice and ownership in the learning process is not supported through task performance due to preset tasks and teachers’ dominant role in the teaching and learning process. Finally, because the tasks are product oriented, the knowledge construction process and meta-cognition in task performance are not adequately practiced, which results in the students not being trained to learn how to learn, how to construct and refine meaning, nor how to reflect on the structure of the task, and on the structuring of their approaches to the task.

There should be changes at every level of the educational task, in terms of aims and objectives of educational programs, nature of curriculum, function of learning content, and assessment. To this end,

- aims and objectives of educational programs must be clearly defined, inclusive, and comprehensive; and they must be known by all educators and students.
- curriculum, in terms of content selection, pedagogy, learning materials, and learning tasks and activities, should be designed and developed with reference to learners’ needs.
and interests.

- the content of learning must serve a dual purpose: providing learners with both a body of knowledge and skills for active learning. In other words, learning strategies should be incorporated into the content of language learning.

- assessment should be both product- and process-oriented; test papers should be designed in ways that not only learned knowledge and skills but also students’ creative and critical thinking are taken into account; different modes and forms of assessment (e.g., on-going, end-of-semester tests; conventional tests, portfolios, etc.) should be used; and self-assessment should be encouraged.

References


