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Portraits of English Language Teachers from the Symbolic Meaning of “The Allegory of the Cave” of Plato in the Context of Vietnam: Insiders’ Perspectives

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Abstract

By the symbolic meaning of “The Allegory of the Cave” as a theory of how humans gained knowledge, Plato meant to imply the limitations in human perception when interacting with the real world. A close relationship between this theory and English teaching in the context of Vietnam was seen from the connotation with complete reflection on the drawbacks of the reality of teaching English at high schools, colleges, and universities for non-English major students. A survey was conducted with data collection from some high school, college, and university teachers to gain more evidence for the situation. The educational stakeholders were also involved in this study to consolidate the viewpoints. The study applied critical pedagogy from some of the most influential proponents in the world to deal with problems. The research results showed that teachers were still under the influence of traditional education and cared much about transmitting as much knowledge as possible to the learners. However, they also expected to change the situation with a number of recognitions and criticism. It was suggested that teachers should get out of their comfort zone and change for the better in teaching and learning English, and the nature of education should be identified differently.

Keywords

the allegory of the cave; human perception; real-world; teaching English; critical pedagogy

Introduction

A teacher is not only responsible for his or her teaching but is also one of the crucial factors shaping educational policy and implementing educational improvements or changes alongside administrators.^{1, 2, 3} In the first place, the critical question of what is taught and what is learned⁴ was concerned. Teaching can be a one-way transmission of knowledge and skills from teachers to students, as in traditional education, or it aims at facilitating learners' learning and maximizing their needs, as in progressive education.⁵

It can be said that education in the 21st century has been to achieve plenty of goals. They are to create and ensure equality, social efficiency, and social mobility for all citizens.⁶ The author argued that the quality of an education system depends on teachers who put into effect the curriculum.⁷ In this sense, but focusing on another aspect, student learning must be the heart of education. Teaching and learning have a close relationship with each other.⁸ Two of these things contribute to each other, and indeed, "there is no one way to teach a subject and no one way that all students learn that subject" in this era.⁹ In a word, education in the 21st century provides students with the skills to grow confidently.

In Vietnamese contexts, English has been considered one of the most important preparations for students to enter the labor market domestically and internationally. Regarding this, the requirement for teaching foreign languages in general and English specifically was determined in the 2019 Vietnamese Education Law:

¹ P. Croll, D. Abbott, P. Broadfoot, M. Osborn, A. Pollard, *Teachers and Education Policy: Roles and Models*, "British Journal of Educational Studies" 1994, 42(4), pp. 333–347, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.1994.9974007>

² G.L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives on Education*, 2nd ed., Massachusetts, 1997.

³ S. Knight, C. Collins, *Opening Teachers' Minds to Philosophy: The Crucial Role of Teacher Education*, "Educational Philosophy and Theory" 2013, 46(11), pp. 1290–1299, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.771450>

⁴ A.A. Glatthorn, *Teacher Autonomy vs. Curricular Anarchy*, "NASSP Bulletin" 1987, 71(498), pp. 77–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F019263658707149813>

⁵ T.T.V. Phan, *Reconstructing the Educational Philosophies in a Context of Vietnam*, Stowarzyszenie „Na Styku” [Na Styku Association], Gdansk 2019.

⁶ C. Maphosa, T. Mashau, *Examining the Ideal 21st Century Teacher-Education Curriculum*, "International Journal of Educational Sciences" 2014, 7(2), pp. 319–327, <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566322.2014/07.02.09>

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

⁸ L. Darling-Hammond, *Teacher Quality and Student Achievement*, "Education Policy Analysis Archives" 2000, 8, 1, pp. 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v8n1.2000>

⁹ J. Loughran, *Pedagogy: Making Sense of the Complex Relationship between Teaching and Learning*, "Curriculum Inquiry" 2013, 43(1), p. 120, <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12003>

"Teaching foreign languages in schools and other educational institutions should guarantee learners with continuing and effective learning process."¹⁰

Therefore, English language teachers' roles have been determined to be very important. Regarding their primary duty of teaching, they may impose knowledge and ethics upon their students as in Confucian education¹¹ or vice versa; students' interests, needs, and experiences were the main goals that Deweyan education aims to be their first choice.¹² In the current Vietnamese Law of Education, any teacher must meet the minimum requirements such as good characteristics, ethics, and the nationalist mindset plus the qualifications. For higher education, a teacher of English must hold at least a master's degree in teaching plus some other requirements related to language proficiency at level C1. A bachelor's degree in teaching is a minimum for high school teachers, plus language proficiency at level C1 for upper secondary school or B2 for lower secondary school. A teacher is stated to hold a decisive role in ensuring the quality of education.

Besides, although the project entitled "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008–2020" has been run in Vietnam for years, aiming at by 2020, students could communicate in a foreign language for daily life, especially using the learned foreign language in their study, and work abroad. Although the project is now due and extended to 2025, and several preparatory things were carried out, from training or retraining teachers to designing a curriculum with a huge amount of money, the goals seem out of reach.

As a matter of fact, many causes leading to the ineffectiveness of the mentioned project have been identified and discussed by many researchers and educators inside and outside of the field. This article aims to investigate the situation from the perspective of teachers and stakeholders' perceptions of teaching, the role of teachers in the classroom, and how they play a decisive role in their teaching in schools and the education system.

Within this paper, the English learners are limited to high school, non-English majors at colleges and universities who have little time to access English and maybe have less awareness about the importance of English than English major students and ones who actively learn the language for specific purposes.

¹⁰ Vietnam National Assembly, *Education Law*, <https://vanbanphapluat.co/law-43-2019-qh14-education> [accessed: 1.05.2024].

¹¹ Q.T. Nguyen, *Examinations and Vietnamese Education*, Ho Chi Minh City 2005.

¹² G.L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives...*, *op. cit.*

Theoretical Framework

Plato – an ancient Greek philosopher, established the basic philosophical foundation for Western Idealism that still remains today.¹³ Plato was also known as the founder of the Academy in Athens, where intellectuals could meet and informally share their interests in philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. During his life, he never reflected his philosophical views directly under his own name but through the dialogues between Socrates (his mentor) and other Greek philosophers in the 5th century B.C.¹⁴ “The Allegory of the Cave,” which belonged to his famous work *Republic*, was written as a form of dialogical conversation between Socrates and Glaucon, a brother of Plato, and it was narrated by the former.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato meant to make a distinction between two kinds of knowledge: visible or sensible and intelligible, in which the first one divided into images and opinions was acquired through the senses and the second one was only gained when people aimed to find universal truth.¹⁵ In fact, because of the symbolic image of humans as prisoners who were chained in a dark cave, Plato wanted to criticize the idea that humans just perceived the world through sensory knowledge rather than by seeking the truth through philosophical reasoning. Gutek¹⁶ clarified this viewpoint: “True knowledge comes as we escape the cave of sensation and opinion and go into the light where the sun, the light of reason, shows things as they truly are.” This theory concerning the human perception of knowledge of Plato requires a deep understanding of its metaphorical meanings. Linking this concern to the reasons for choosing the Allegory of the Cave, the first one is the chaos and crises in the educational situations in Vietnam leading to the current reform. As the second reason, different Vietnamese generations seem to have been exposed to a similar system of education; thanks to this, “teachers can easily discover the limitations of the education by their own experience; but when they attempt to make changes they cannot completely escape from the way of thinking which was imposed and ingrained.”¹⁷ These reasons would share some senses with the metaphors of the Allegory of the Cave with the resistance and hesitation of making changes. These metaphors with three primary hidden meanings were drawn out from this work to evoke the reality of teaching English as follows:

First, the adversity of humans as prisoners who cannot see anything except for their shadows reflected against the wall are depicted as “human beings live in an underground den, which has a mouth open toward the light and reaching all along

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁴ H.R. Popkin, A. Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, New York 1993.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*; G.L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ G.L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ T.T.V. Phan, *Reconstructing the Educational Philosophies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

with the den. They have been here from their childhood and have their legs and necks 'chained' so that they cannot move, can only see *what* before them, and are prevented by the chains from turning round their heads."¹⁸

Second, the misery of humans who have never seen real objects or learned about the world outside the cave before cannot be aware that their shadows were never a "real" thing.

Third, humans fear stepping out of the cave to a place that does not belong to them, and as a result, they never expect someone to set them free. In this respect, the prisoners in the cave do not believe in the findings of the escaped prisoner who returns to the cave to free those who share the same plight.

Derive from the sense of the three above features as an endless circle humans have encountered during their lives, the problems of English teaching are mainly recognized from the roots of the stakeholders' wrong perceptions about the nature of teaching and learning. In fact, the problems that will be figured out and analyzed concerning Plato's theory concerning human perception hopefully contribute to improving the inevitable consequences of not being able to use the learned language among aforementioned Vietnamese students.

The adversity of humans when *being chained in a dark cave* so that they cannot see anything except for *the shadows of themselves and other things* is seen from the central role of teachers in their teaching and common conception about learning in Vietnam. It is noted that what Plato really meant here is that humans limit their vision to a narrow space within the mouth of a cave. In other words, humans as prisoners are a symbolic image showing problems in their thinking rather than in their physical bodies. Back to the central role of teachers, which society prescribes for them, they have been under layers of pressure; for example, they are a good resource for students to learn or perform teaching with good results. As a result, to effectively carry out such roles, teachers tend to impose knowledge upon students, or they may care much about how to transfer the assigned content of the lessons from the curriculum to the students. According to Dewey,¹⁹ teachers are responsible for imposing knowledge and standards from above and outside the learning process. It means the teacher as a facilitator should prioritize students' interests and needs over any other factors when dealing with them in order to provide them with appropriate knowledge, skills, and opportunities to develop themselves. In light of that metaphor, English tends to provide the learners with *the shadows* of their knowledge and lessons about this language, which they may not even have a chance to see how the world has used

¹⁸ H.R. Popkin, A. Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–179.

¹⁹ J. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York 1938.

in reality.²⁰ *The shadows of knowledge* in language teaching have been traditionally and culturally transmitted from generation to generation of teachers with and without any sense of seeing the “real sunlights” – the real diversities of the language world outside of “their cave” – their teaching context.

However, to avoid the misery of equating their shadows with real things as one of the symbolic meanings from the Allegory of the Cave, teachers must realize their role as more than facilitators in Deweyan education.²¹ Regarding the idea that teachers should do something more than facilitators in their teaching, Biesta²² reasons that “teaching cannot be entirely immanent to the educational situation but requires a notion of transcendence”.²³ By this statement, Biesta implies that teaching cannot just replicate the shadows as real things since “it cannot be entirely immanent to the educational situation” but should pursue the real things from the “notion of transcendence” that teachers must “bring something new to the educational situation, something that was not already there.”²⁴

In addition, the teachers of English may not recognize “their fear of stepping out of the cave” for different ways of understanding themselves and the world outside. The reasons could be derived from the risk of accepting new things, the disappointment of bringing their new views, the failure to communicate with their people in the cave, and the fact that they no longer have the same views as their students. It is not just a matter of conservative thoughts but also the resistance of each side to what they know and to limit themselves. It is because “one cannot know what he does not know since if he does not know it, how can he know it” (Plato). Without the same inference and equality from the two sides, it is difficult for the “intelligent people” in the cave with a fierce belief in what they see in their place to trust in the “ignorant persons” who have stepped out of the cave, transformed and gone back with knowledge about the unbounded world outside of the cave. Linking this to teaching, the equality in knowledge and the ability to perceive the world between the teacher and students, which is recognized in “The Ignorant Schoolmaster,” is not seen in Vietnamese education now. Truly, the core meaning of this work of Rancière²⁵ is fully presented as “I must teach you that I have noth-

²⁰ I. MacKenzie, *English as a Lingua Franca in Europe: Bilingualism and Multicompetence*, “International Journal of Multilingualism” 2012, 9(1), pp. 83–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2011.610506>

²¹ N. Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*. Boulder, Colorado 1995.

²² G.J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risks of Education*, Colorado 2013.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ J. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster – Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford 1991.

ing to teach you.”²⁶ This implies the emphasis on the equal positions of both the teachers and students in exploring, creating, and reconstructing new knowledge. If they do not share the same position at the beginning of the educational process, they tend to transmit and impose what they know or what they believe as an important epistemology to the learners. From this sense, the educational process could be classified as the authoritarian education of the oppressors as an objection to Freire’s work rather than the world tendency of critical theories as in Rancière’s perspective.

In short, in English teaching, this phenomenon with the metaphor from the Allegory of the Cave might imply that the teachers who have not yet transformed their thinking of language teaching from neoliberal purposes to humanistic ones. For that reason, they would not be able to accept the reality outside of their cave and change for the sake of their learners’ demands.

Methodology

To specifically clarify how teachers perceive their crucial roles in teaching practice as well as making educational improvements, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers from high schools, colleges, and universities, addressing the two main questions.

1. What do they do in their language teaching?
2. What should be changed in teaching English currently? How and Why?

The diversified participants’ perspectives would help triangulate the data to better understand the key concepts. These questions were also the focus of the semi-structured interviews. The interviewing process followed with a general acquaintance and introduction for the purposes of the research before the questions plus the follow-up ones.

In addition, to consolidate the interview results and learn about how Vietnamese people think about education and the role of English teachers, a survey via Microsoft Forms was sent to a large number of people. Two hundred and thirty-three participants of various ages with anonymity, including teachers at all levels of education, from high school to university, responded to the survey. The additional data from the survey were used to consolidate and revisit the participants’ perceptions from a small group of interviewees to a larger group of participants.

The data collected from the interviews and the quantitative data from the survey were analyzed qualitatively regarding the perceptions towards teaching and

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

learning English among diverse research participants. The extracts were coded among interviews, and the coding methods were as follows:

Code	Extracts	Coded for
H-T4-R	“Every class, I check if my students do homework at home because they often do not voluntarily do it.”	H = High school T4 = Teacher 4 R = Role of teachers and students
U-T1-TS	“... I organize some learning activities for students to acquire the new lesson easily ...”	U = University T1 = Teacher 1 TS = Suggestions for changing the current situation of teaching English
C-T5-R	“At the beginning of a class, I ask some students to »retell« the last lesson, then I teach them the new lesson, and after that, I ask them to do exercises by working in groups or pairs to help them remember the knowledge right in the class.”	C = College T5 = Teacher 5 R = Role of teachers and students

The data from open questions in the survey was classified into four main themes related to the statements with anonymity, including perceptions about (1) the reality of teaching activities in class with the highest purpose of helping students understand the lesson clearly, (2) education as a process of transmitting knowledge and skills to learners, (3) the teachers’ role models for students to follow, and (4) the teachers’ limited decisive roles in the educational program and the training goals.

Findings

The data from the interviews showed teachers’ willingness to share their own stories about the concerning issues with evidence and valuable ideas from their teaching reality. The survey results strengthened the belief about the central role of teachers among Vietnamese people, which has partly led to some problems with language teaching in the mentioned contexts. The gained data were analyzed qualitatively, focusing on realizing the research issues in light of the three symbolic meanings of Plato’s “The Allegory of the Cave” from the view of critical theories for the findings as follows.

Findings on Teachers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Language Teaching

To be assigned an important role in making a class happen, teachers-interviewees showed their awareness about how to maximize students' full participation in class activities. In this sense, they mentioned their roles as information providers, organizers, checkers, or supervisors, which were found in progressive philosophies of education, which, according to them, aimed at promoting the active role of students in class. They shared one thing in common: that the ultimate goal was to help learners understand the lectures so they could carry out the activities in class.

... I organize some learning activities for students to acquire the new lesson easily ... [play some games, work in pairs or groups] (U-T1-R)

Every class, I check if my students do homework at home because they often do not voluntarily do it ... [students must be accompanied by teacher supervision] (H-T4-R)

Besides, the findings showed that teachers usually prepared theory or knowledge for students before having them carry out the follow-up activities. The extracts from C-T5-R and H-T3-R illustrated the issue:

At the beginning of a class, I ask some students to "retell" the last lesson, then I teach them [students] the new lesson, and after that, I ask them to do exercises by working in groups or pairs to help them remember the knowledge right in the class (C-T5-R)

... students must pay close attention and take notes [when the teacher is giving lectures] (H-T3-R)

The findings showed a devoted image of a teacher. What they did was to help students gain the exact knowledge from the lessons they prepared rather than provide students with opportunities to self-acquire the knowledge and decide on the ways and what they really wanted to study.

The results from the survey somehow were compatible with the interview findings and reflected the recognition and perception of society about the concept of teaching or the problem that was identified from the interviews. Regarding this, up to 188 participants (accounting for 81%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that "English teachers use many interactive activities in class with the highest purpose of helping students understand the lesson clearly." The pie chart below illustrates the distribution of the consensus level of participants.

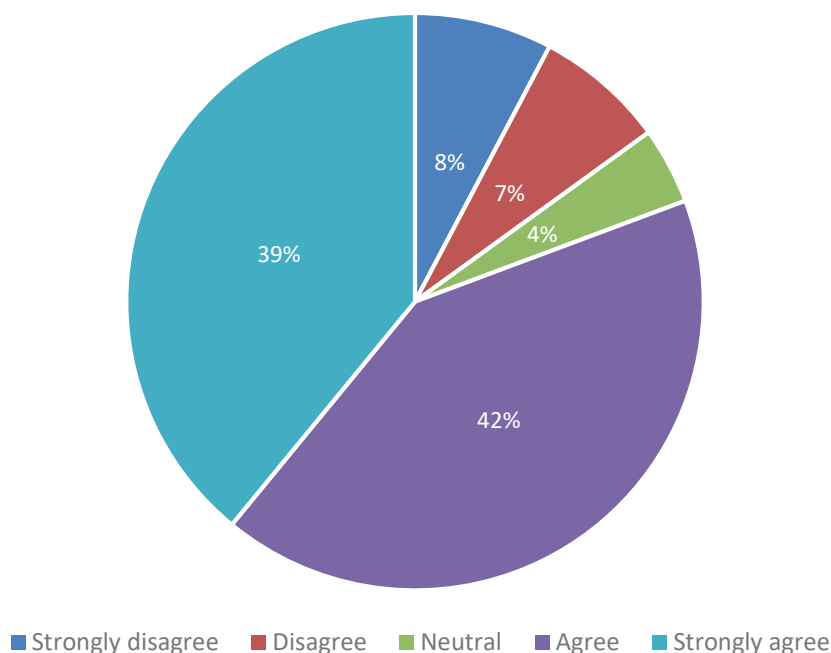


Figure 1. English teachers use many interactive activities in class with the highest purpose of helping students understand the lesson clearly

Source: self-generated.

The ones who disagreed with the aforementioned statement from the survey presented their ideas with some reasons, and coincidentally, these reasons were derived from the core meaning of “understand the lesson content thoroughly” and “understand the lectures for being able to carry out the activities in class” as in interview result. The following extracts would clarify the matter.

It [Using interactive activities] is for students to be interested in the lesson content (anonymous 2)

It [Using interactive activities] helps students not only understand [the lesson content] but also remember and be able to practice the learned lesson content (anonymous 13)

[It] helps students apply what they learned [lesson content] into practice (anonymous 9)

Just five responses mentioned other aspects gained from employing interactive activities in the classroom as below:

Understanding the content of the lesson is not difficult, and it is difficult for the learner to understand what that lesson is for and how to do it if they want to apply the lesson in practice (anonymous 14)

It [Using interactive activities] is also for developing characteristics and skills (anonymous 10)

... can practice more skills (anonymous 12)

It helps satisfy other needs of students (anonymous 1)

Not sure. It [using interactive activities] is just because of social and professional pressures (anonymous 11)

The habit of exaggerating the importance of textbooks and fixed courses by which teachers were suggested to be responsible for guiding or orientating students has partly reduced the ability of students to self-determine what they need in their academic lives.

Students must do homework in textbooks before class (H-T3-R)

Teachers must follow the prescribed program to ensure student output (H-T4-R)

To explain her idea, she continued to share:

... Honestly, I rarely have students do learning activities in class [interactive activities such as pair work, group work, debate, or presentation...] because I must complete the lecture on time [forty-five minutes for each class] (H-T4-R)

I instruct students to do the exercises [they are assigned to work in pairs or groups or individually] and correct them in class (U-T1-R)

C-T5-R's response was quite similar to the U-T1-R's one:

... I do help students correct exercises in the learning material after they finish doing them.

Students are required to take part in at least 80% of class meetings for a course (C-T5-R)

This finding was strengthened by Le's²⁷ recognition of teachers' heavy dependence upon textbooks and their destructive consequences on students' learning outcomes in his study.

In addition, from the teaching contexts of a number of participants, it can be seen that although students were involved in some activities that seemed to help stimulate their independent thinking, such as presentation, discussion, asking questions, or playing games, students still were not allowed to think outside of

²⁷ V.C. Le, Những vướng mắc trong việc nâng cao chất lượng dạy tiếng Anh ở trường phổ thông và các giải pháp [Challenges in improving the quality of teaching English in high schools and solutions], 2009, pp. 55–56, <https://bit.ly/39OslXB> [accessed: 1.05.2024].

the lectures or do something different from predefined standards. Every exercise and learning activity was evaluated by a fixed answer or a certain criterion. In fact, a participant (C-T5-R) confirmed that “While having students work in groups, I often go around the class for immediate support if they [students] do not know how to answer the questions.” In this sense, U-T2-R confirms that “... before ending a class, I reserve about 5 to 10 minutes for students to ask about the content of the lesson if they do not master any points.”

A considerable difference was identified between the sense of critical theories and traditional oppression in education from what the teachers employed in this research. For the former, there would be no fixed answers for any products or discussions, and logical skills would be pretty essential to judge some possibilities of the discussed issues. In fact, the collected information revealed that teachers usually provided prior knowledge or theory to orient students’ activities or ensure that every student could apply the lesson content to activities exactly. At the same time, teachers would modify or make some corrections for students if there were any misunderstandings or the information was lacking during the class. As a matter of fact, the teacher played a central role in the class, controlling and deciding on all activities and even directly intervening in students’ learning. This reflected a contradiction between what teachers thought about their students’ roles and what they really did in their teaching process. The results from the survey for this issue also showed that students were not provided with any chances to debate some social or practical issues or present their own views on an issue in lessons. Such discouragement of thinking out of the box and limitation in promoting an individual’s identity in studying may lead to the shortages of several abilities and skills that are extremely important for students’ future, such as critical thinking, thinking independently, public speaking, and solving problems. These limitations, found commonly among Vietnamese students, were drawn out in the Vietnam Development Report 2014 titled “Skilling up Vietnam: Preparing the workforce for a modern market economy,” organized in Hanoi on November 29, 2013, by the World Bank.

The result from a survey stated that “Education is a process of transmitting knowledge and skills to learners,” with up to 178 out of 233 participants (76.4%) choosing to agree and strongly agree with it strengthened the above finding as in the pie below.

The habit and conception of highlighting the one-way transmission of knowledge and skills from teachers to learners among different people created such a “close” education and such a central role for teachers. This has been reinforced by the high consensus of 86% (201 out of 233 participants agreed and strongly agreed) from the survey, which argued that “Teachers must be role models for students to follow.” The pie chart illustrates the issue.

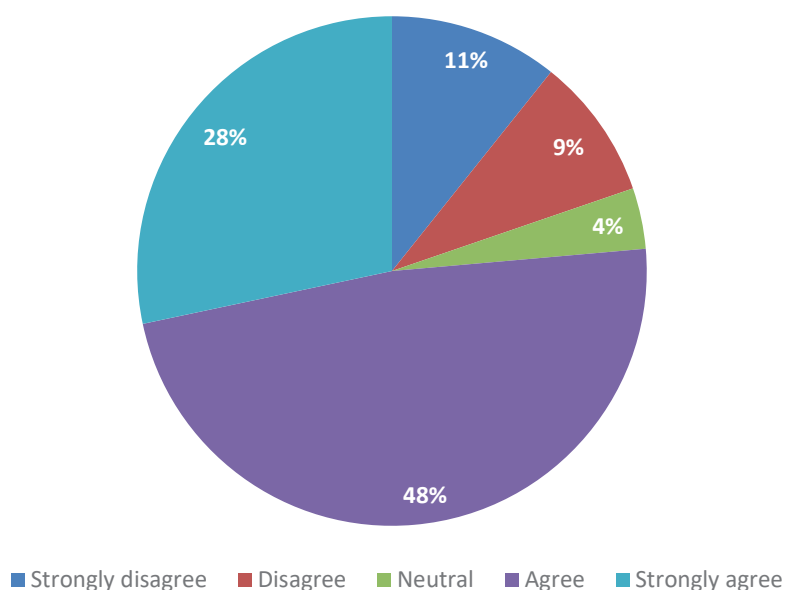


Figure 2. Education is a process of transmitting knowledge and skills to learners

Source: self-generated.

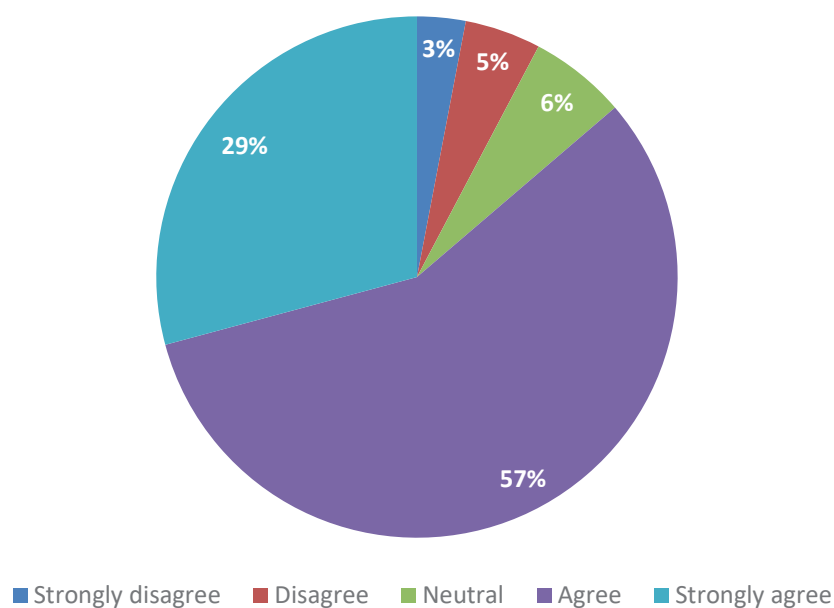


Figure 3. Teachers must be role models for students to follow

Source: self-generated.

As a result, what students receive is bound only in the “shadows” or reflections of teachers’ knowledge and assigned content of lessons learned in the curriculum. Changing perception from imposing knowledge upon students to imposing from above and outside to the learning process with the knowledge and standards as in

Dewey²⁸ and especially to the meaning of transcendence should be concerned to take students and teachers out of the dark cave of how to perceive knowledge and process the experience appropriately.²⁹

Findings on Teachers' Thinking and Suggestions for Changing the Current Situation of Teaching English

The requirements for appropriate curriculum and textbooks, student-centered methods, skill-focused teaching, and the concerns about heavy curriculum, pressure in teaching, and examinations were shared by U-T1-TS, C-T6-TS, H-T3-TS, and H-T4-TS as follows:

Students learn too much, not only at school but also at home [the curriculum is too heavy] (H-T3-TS)

To tell the truth, the content in the textbook ... is very boring (H-T3-TS)

They [students] just focus on studying the subjects that they sit for graduation and admission exams (H-T4-TS)

Most of my students are so passive that they do not dare to talk in front of the class (U-T1-TS)

Teachers are required to accomplish 580 hours per academic year for both teaching and doing research, and this causes overload for teachers (C-T6-TS)

To deal with the problems happening in their contexts, U-T1-TS suggested a solution that "... teachers should provide more opportunities for every student [*regardless of whether a student is good or bad*] to participate in class activities."

Similarly but differently from the subject, U-T2-TS believed that "Teachers should have more rights to decide on education programs". She continued to explain her idea: "... They are the ones who know exactly what students need and the capacity of their students."

This judgment was compatible with the survey stating, "The crucial role for the educational program and the training goals of the teachers are minimal," with the percentage of agreement and strong agreement accounting for 64.4%. The following pie illustrates the distribution.

²⁸ J. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, op. cit.

²⁹ G.J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risks of Education*, op. cit.

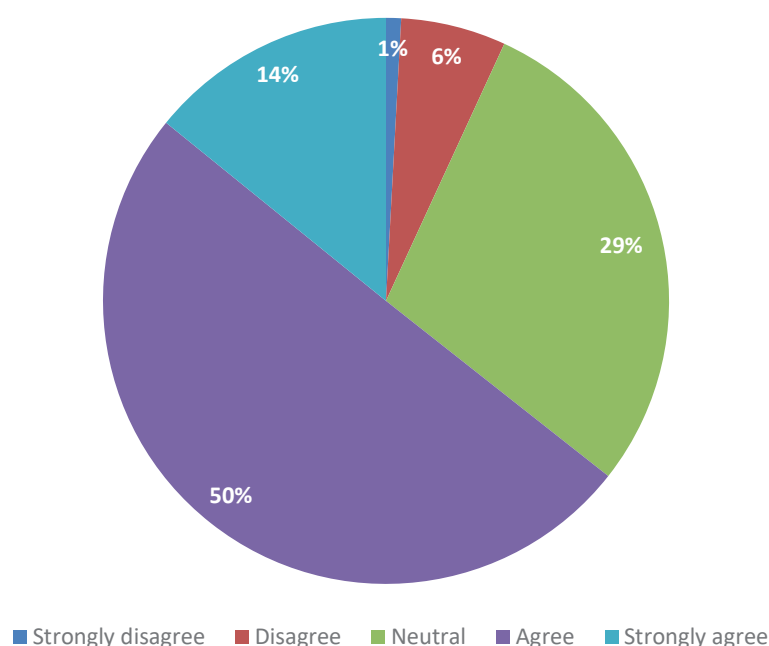


Figure 4. The crucial role for the educational program and the training goals of the teachers are very limited

Source: self-generated.

Four ideas were gained from the open-ended question regarding why the participants did not agree with the statement or if they had different ideas or wanted to explain their choice.

Currently, there have been some minor changes (anonymous 25)

Every idea or curriculum that teacher wants to innovate almost always requires approval from the superiors, so the teacher's decision making is very limited (anonymous 27)

What can I do as an insignificant teacher? The superior asks what to do, the subordinate will do that (anonymous 40)

Teachers are closest to students, so they influence students the most (anonymous 5)

Along with their share of such problems, teachers suggested corresponding ways or solutions for dealing with their position as insiders of the teaching context. Indeed, teachers' valuable ideas contributed not only to identifying both the limitations and emancipation of teachers themselves but also helped recognize wrong perceptions about teaching and learning English from other educational stakeholders.

Discussion

The discussion for this part also used the metaphor from Plato's work. From this, a paradox was figured out based on what teachers thought and did in their teaching. In one way, teachers called for the central role of students in the class, which could support students' development. On the other hand, they did not really give students opportunities to fully promote such a role based on what they perceived and carried out their roles and students' roles in the previous part. In addition, a teacher who criticized textbooks for their inappropriate and heavy content somehow proved her undervaluation of teachers' transcendent role in their teaching. In other words, the presence of a teacher in an educational context was perceived as a "shadow" of assigned books or teaching materials, no more or less, and this finding was compatible with the study of Lewis & McCook³⁰ in which teachers merely paid attention to employ traditional teaching methods for students to remember grammatical points from the books. This also reflects the reality that teaching English in the Vietnamese national education system focuses on helping students acquire as much knowledge from textbooks or learning material as possible, regardless of any method for authenticity and skill development.³¹ With such a way of learning English, high school students who took the English test for the graduate exam in 2017 were found to face difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, so they could not pass or achieve the expected results for this subject.³² Instead, students should be provided with opportunities to "step out of the cave" by using what they learn about the language to respond to the world with unexpected and open questions; for example, being evaluated on their cognitive development with language flexibility rather than their fixed beliefs of what should be focused on only linguistic knowledge and the framed skills.

Furthermore, a drawback of learning English now is seen in family pressure when more and more parents want their children to be the best ever students. Resulting from this misery of not being able to know which the "real" thing is to perceive or which is more important for a child, as a surveyed teacher recognized, children's childhood is under a burden of learning so that they cannot be happy and innocent as their age anymore. It has been claimed that Vietnamese parents

³⁰ M. Lewis, F. McCook, *Cultures of Teaching: Voices from Vietnam*, "ELT Journal" 2002, 56(2), pp. 146–153, <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/56.2.146>

³¹ J. Peterson, *Giáo viên Tây lý giải vì sao người Việt khó học tiếng Anh* [Western teachers explain why Vietnamese people have difficulty learning English], VnExpress, October 2014, <https://bit.ly/3wuAOXE> [accessed: 1.01.2022].

³² Thanh niên Online, *Trực tiếp bình luận đề thi môn tiếng Anh kỳ thi THPT quốc gia 2017* [Directly comment on the English test for high school graduation 2017], Thanh niên, June 2017, <https://bit.ly/3ySKEzh> [accessed: 1.01.2022].

tend to impose their wishes upon their children, and as a result, children are usually under the arrangements of parents for many aspects of life, i.e., what to study or what should and should not do.³³ From an educational point of view, this social phenomenon makes people lose their activeness and self-command if they are required to make any decision by themselves. Besides, when studying some subjects that are not derived from their desire, students can certainly not study to the best of their ability. In other words, the reality that students learn to satisfy their parents still exists in Vietnamese society; accordingly, students' learning is just the reflection of their parents' *visible shadows* or expectations.

Although there is the fact that English teachers in Vietnam, especially high school teachers, should be compliant with the national regulations and rules, among the choices of different foreign languages, students can choose to learn English as a school subject no matter whether for neoliberal purposes or humanistic ones. Differently from some limitations in teachers' perceptions about their teaching, they also showed emancipated thinking about how to currently change the situation of teaching English. First, the examination should be considered for its practicability due to the fact that an exam with different focuses may prevent a student from learning to adapt to social needs, and the examination is also changed to emphasize the ability to use the language. Second, language learners need to have more practice with speaking the language to develop arguing, debating, and critical thinking abilities, and more importantly, they had better study with native teachers, those with linguistic talents, or those who "stepped out of the cave and returned" for an authentic sense of language learning. Third, teachers should have chances to learn and develop their profession. Last, curriculum and learning materials must focus more on communicative tasks. These suggestions indicate that teachers want to make changes from their own and other sides. It means they are ready to get out of the "dark cave," accept the new perceptions, be tolerant of the obsolete thoughts, and bring some new educational ideas back to their nature of helping learners develop comprehensively.

In general, although teachers cannot escape their assigned roles by society and still limit themselves and their students in the curriculum, they conveyed some progressive thinking about English teaching with practical solutions. Therefore, it follows that teachers would be the main factor in changing and increasing the quality of English teaching and learning, provided that they have awareness and the correct orientation. With proper awareness of language usage in the real world, tolerance of accepting differences, transcendent manners in every lesson, and the sake of critical theories, English language teaching and learning would be transformed and reconstructed to better the learners' learning.

³³ T.T.V. Phan, *Reconstructing the Educational Philosophies...*, *op. cit.*

Limitation

This study would bring more contributions if it also focused on the participants' understanding or meaning related to "stepping out of the cave." This limitation can be explained from the reality that "stepping out of the cave" would not be easy when "we know what we know." In case that someone would be ready to step out of the cave, the risks and competencies would be a new unpredicted variable. In fact, the ability to recognize oneself as in a cave or not or understand that concept may not be available within the culture. The routines and risks may stop anyone from changing in some ways. This process may take longer to be popular with more choices, praxis, and motivations.

Implications and Conclusion

More than anyone else, teachers must have the right to choose how to develop professionally. Rather than having some certificates as required by the project, they need to *step out of the cave* to contact the outside world by learning the natural language that the world is using or even from any sources of native speakers. It should be noted that language learning is not only for exams but also for communicative and working purposes of the nature of any language.

For students, besides the prescribed curriculum, teaching English should start from the praxis of students. Praxis³⁴ is derived from what people act and is linked to some values in their social lives. The demands of the learners should be motivated and fostered to be higher than any other factors in their language learning. With the possible highest demands and from their learning praxis, they will critically learn a sort of language that would be important for their future realistic usage but not for the teachers' thoughts of how languages should be used.

From the implications of critical theories, going back after *stepping out of the cave* promotes the teachers with more awareness of what should be important for the learners' language learning, not the teachers' language teaching, and how they should ensure equality at the beginning of exploration process with the learners. In particular, language teaching with the perspectives of critical theories would call for attention and go along with either doubts or chances. Teachers will be doubtful and confused about how to make their positions equal to learners in language teaching when they have to be the explicators during the lessons. Even if the teachers do not follow the books or some types of content, will society and the parents accept their ways of teaching? However, the chances exist that when teach-

³⁴ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30 year anniversary publication), New York 2005.

ers genuinely go from the learners' needs and prudential demands, they would learn something different from being imposed on certain types of language and information. When the learners differ from each other, the language needs to vary, too. For that reason, language teaching and learning should be concerned with the new tendency of education of critical theories. As with critical theories, the reality of language teaching would be possibly transformed, and the drawbacks seen from the metaphor of "The Allegory of the Cave" would be minimized for a better world of language for integration and the satisfaction of the national goals.

In conclusion, although the drawbacks were obviously signaled from the participants' perception, which would be indifferent to the metaphor of the "Allegory of the Cave," they have also implied the different ways to overcome and resolve the situations with some possibilities from applying the critical theories. The reality of language teaching in Vietnam would be possible to transform from its own immanence as long as the teachers develop their consciousness of *their beings in their cave* with the needs of the new generations *to step out of it*.

Recommendations

Future research should focus more on elaborating on those teachers' efforts to get rid of the "cave." They should be aware of the cave, and when they are struggling to get out of it, they should ask themselves whether they are truly out of it and in the process of struggle.

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Appendix 1: The survey

A. Basic information (Phần thông tin cá nhân)

Please provide your information!

Xin vui lòng cung cấp thông tin cá nhân của Quý thầy cô!

1. Full name (*Họ và tên*) (not compulsory, *không bắt buộc*): _____

2. Gender: _____ Male/ Nam _____ Female/ Nữ _____ Other/ Khác

3. You are _____ (Quý thầy cô là)
 _____ a teacher of English (*giáo viên tiếng Anh*)
 _____ not a teacher of English (*không phải giáo viên tiếng Anh*)

4. Your age range (*Độ tuổi của Thầy cô*)

_____ <22–25

_____ 25–40

_____ >40

B. Please choose your level of agreement on each statement and clarify your ideas regarding each (*Xin Quý vị vui lòng chọn mức độ đồng ý và chia sẻ ý kiến (quan điểm) của cá nhân liên quan đến mỗi phát biểu*)

This survey only focuses on your perception relating to the teaching and educational perspectives in a context of Vietnam.

Những vấn đề được khảo sát liên quan mật thiết đến nghề giáo và việc dạy học của Quý thầy cô đã từng hay đang trải nghiệm trong bối cảnh Việt Nam.

1. English teachers use many interactive activities in class with the highest purpose of helping students understand the lesson clearly

Giáo viên sử dụng nhiều hoạt động tương tác trên lớp với mục đích cao nhất là giúp người học hiểu rõ nội dung bài học

- _____ Strongly disagree (Rất không đồng ý)
- _____ Disagree (Không đồng ý)
- _____ Neutral (Không chọn được ý kiến)
- _____ Agree (Đồng ý)
- _____ Strongly agree (Rất đồng ý)

Please clarify or share your ideas related to the statement!

Hãy vui lòng làm rõ và chia sẻ ý kiến của Thầy Cô liên quan đến phát biểu trên!
