FROM THEORIES TO PRACTICE OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: *This study aims to investigate EFL teachers' knowledge about learning and language theories as well as pedagogy in relation to teaching foreign languages in the context of a 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 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 further professional development for the EFL teachers and future researchers.*

Keywords: EFL teachers; Learning theories; Language theories; Pedagogical knowledge; Higher education

1. Introduction

In Vietnam English language teaching at higher educational level is divided into two categories: English language as a discipline, and English language 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, applied 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). Teaching English in the both categories requires EFL teachers to have theoretical knowledge of learning, language and pedagogy. However, what and how EFL teachers' knowledge about learning and language theories and their knowledge about pedagogy is still unknown and need to be investigated.

Research Questions

Considering the above discussion of the purpose of the study, and to frame the anticipated insights and understanding, the following research questions have been formulated to guide this study:

1. To what extent do EFL teachers understand about learning and language theories?

2. How is EFL teachers' pedagogical knowledge? This research question is tailored by the following sub-questions:

   a. What methods do EFL teachers often use to teach English?

   b. How do EFL teachers adapt teaching style and assessing students' learning outcomes?

   c. How do EFL teachers select appropriate teaching materials to the needs of students?

2. Literature review

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

2.1 Learning and Language Theories

2.1.1 Learning Theories

Although there are several ways of conceptualising learning theories, they can best be viewed as conceptual or philosophical accounts of how people learn (Lavadenz, 2011). These accounts include different elements or dimensions - different theories in effect, such as behaviourism, cognitivism, and sociocultural theory, or constructivism/social constructivism, as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Overview of learning theories and teaching implications (adapted from Lavadenz, 2011)

Learning theories	Origination	Definitions and instructional implications
Behaviourism	US c. 1914; influenced by European empiricism	Learning as a response to environmental stimuli; it can be manipulated, observed, and described (Watson; 1919, Skinner, 1938). Teaching through activities like drills, practice, repetition, and rewards.
Cognitivism	1950s to present	Learning can be explained as a deep, complex psychological phenomenon, involving elements such as motivation, schemas, and processes for learning (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1974). Teaching occurs in phases with gradual complexity.

Sociocultural (Constructivism or Social Constructivism)	1970s to present	Learning is influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors. Learning takes place within social interactions and contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Teaching occurs through meaningful interactions between experts and novices.

As summarized in Table 2.1, behaviourist learning theory considered learning as a response to stimuli in the environment, and learners as "creatures of habit" who can be manipulated, observed, and described (Lavadenz, 2011. p. 19). The theory constructs learners as being controlled by factors outside of themselves and as responding to external stimuli. Cognitivist learning theories, on the other hand, see learning as involving deeper, more complex psychological phenomena, such as intrinsic motivation, schemas, and various internal processes of learning. These different conceptualisations were classified as two branches of theory - developmental cognitive learning theory and socio-constructivist learning theory.

Developmental cognitive learning theory was developed by Piaget (1974), whilst socio-constructivist theory was developed by Vygotsky (1976) and Bruner (1996). Piaget believed that learning occurred in stages and followed a systematic sequence; whereas Vygotsky and Bruner proposed that development took place as a result of learning experience, scaffolded or supported through interaction with others. A sociocultural theory of learning built upon constructivist approaches "begins with the assumption that action is mediated and that it cannot be separated from the social contexts in which it is carried out" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 18).

Knowledge of the development and key principles of learning theories is essential for second or foreign language teachers. Without this knowledge it is difficult to teach languages effectively (Lavadenz, 2011). The following section reviews language theories which inform foreign language teaching methods.

2.1.2 Language Theories

Becoming a qualified teacher of any language requires foundational knowledge of both content and the theories that inform the *what* and the *how* of language teaching (Valadenz, 2010) since theories provide the necessary background and scaffolding. Language theories are classified as structural, cognitive, functional, communicative, and interactional. Table 2.2 provides a brief overview of language theories.

Table 2.2

Overview of Language Theories (adapted from Valadenz, 2010)

Language theories	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 language theory

Structural language theory 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 language theory

Cognitive language theory shifted focus from the structure of the language to what is 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).

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 explicit generation and analysis of new language structures (Lavadenz, 2011).

Functional or communicative language 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 has been of the best known and well-established approaches to language teaching and learning (Alamri, 2018).

Interactional language theory

Another important theoretical development was that of 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.

2.1.3 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, and (v) literacy skills (Cherner & Smith, 2016).

3. Methodology

This 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 last about 15 to 20 minutes in length. After interviewing, the raw data were transcribed and language 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 about learning and language theories as well as pedagogy were coded in the theme *EFL teachers' PK*. All initial codes for this theme were collapsed into six categories: (i) the ability to use appropriate teaching methods, (ii) the ability to change methods and styles of teaching, (iii) the ability to choose teaching materials, (iv) the ability to manage and control students, (v) the ability to evaluate students' learning outcomes, and (vi) knowledge about second language and learning theories. Typical responses to questions in each category are presented in Figure 4.1.
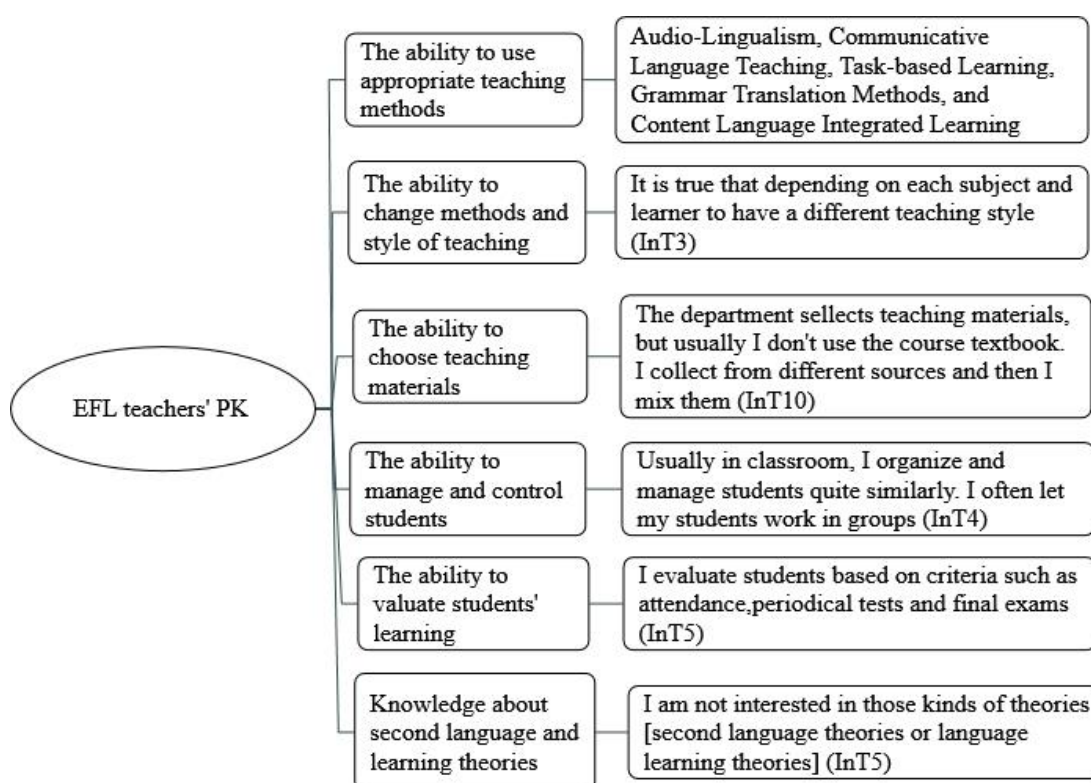

Figure 4.1. EFL Teachers' knowledge about learning and language theories and pedagogy

5. Discussion

Learning and language theories 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 language learning, 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, to 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 learning theories such as behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism (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 learning 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, to manage the classroom and to evaluate their students' learning outcomes. The findings suggest, therefore, a degree of flexibility and the ability to adapt.

Discussion presented in the literature review clearly 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 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.

The above discussion highlights the important knowledge of theories about learning, 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 learning, language and pedagogy is a prerequisite to enable EFL teachers to select and apply appropriate methods to effectively support teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion and suggestions

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 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 learning and 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.

7. References

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